

A MODEL OF EXCELLENCE FOR WEEKLY NEWSPAPERS IN IOWA

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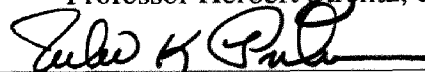
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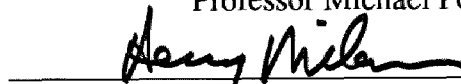
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An abstract of a thesis by

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Weekly newspapers are what people read to find out their local news. While *The Des Moines Register* and the like cover the "big" news of the day — Haiti, Somalia, health care — it is the weekly newspapers that bring people the most local news — city council reports, the features on local heroes and the information on how the "big" news affects their small communities. But there is little in existing research to tell us what exactly is the charge of weekly newspapers, and even less telling us how well they live up to this charge.

This thesis starts by reporting the results of a survey of 100 editors of Iowa weekly newspapers to determine which weekly newspapers in Iowa are considered the best, what the best weekly newspapers in Iowa do well, and what all weekly newspapers in Iowa do well. From the responses to this survey, it is easy to determine that Iowa weekly editors believe that weekly newspapers should present mostly local news, they should do it honestly and accurately, and they should package it attractively.

But while this offers a snapshot of what the quality weekly should strive for, it provides little information on how weekly newspapers achieve those goals. The second portion of the thesis, consisting of visits to four of Iowa's top weekly newspapers as identified in the first part of the thesis and surveys of their staffs, illuminates the path those four newspapers have taken to excellence.

Generally, these papers rely on strong staffs with college educations in journalism to lead their newspapers. Their newsrooms are independent operations, supported by management and protected from the influence of powerful people and advertisers in the community. At the same time, they exist primarily in well-educated communities and have tried to educate their readers, as well as themselves, to recognize and appreciate good journalism.

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CHAPTER 1 Introduction and Literature Review

For many Americans, Iowans included, the weekly newspaper is a valuable resource. While the number of weekly newspapers in the United States has remained steady at 7,500 for approximately 15 years, a study by three journalism professors reported that circulation during that time climbed 53.6 percent, from 28 million in 1970 to 43 million in 1985.¹ Circulation of weeklies nationwide climbed 6.2 million between 1986 and 1991.² According to *News Inc.*, a magazine focusing on the business aspect of newspapers, circulation is climbing because:

Weeklies occupy an important information niche for readers; the publishers say their papers break local news well ahead of competing dailies. That highly local focus, along with a healthy dollop of pure opinion, is the heart of the weekly strategy, with publishers content to leave the broader universe to the dailies.³

But while publishers say that it is local news that sells papers, few people have asked editors whether they do a good job of covering local news or what constitutes a good job of covering local news. Indeed, few people ask if local news is the priority in the newsroom at weekly newspapers.

Some researchers are beginning to examine the traits of an excellent weekly newspaper, but they base much of their research on models of excellence devised for daily newspapers, which often have a different focus and different goals from the weeklies. Those who are researching weekly newspapers specifically are focusing on consistent award winners across the country, rather than looking at newspapers as a group.⁴

Much of the information available on weekly newspapers is quantitative.

¹Ray Laakaniemi, William Green and Laurence Jankowski, "Winning Weeklies: Common traits of award winners," *Newspaper Research Journal*, Winter/Spring 1992, 138.

²Hanna Liebman, "Weekly Almanac," *News Inc.*, Nov. 1991, special report, 4.

³Staff report, "Ready For," *News Inc.*, Nov. 1991, special report, 2.

⁴Laakaniemi et al, 139.

News Inc. determined in a 1991 study that the average weekly is independently owned. It runs about 18 pages broadsheet each week and is distributed on Wednesdays or Thursdays. The average circulation is 2,800. Three-quarters of the readers receive it at home, mostly by mail. Almost all pay for it, at an average of 39 cents a copy.⁵

According to Bill Monroe, executive director of the Iowa Newspaper Association, Iowa weeklies are doing fairly well. More than 340 weeklies dot the state. In a 1990 readership survey in the state, 91.4 percent of those people saying they read a weekly newspaper said they had looked at a newspaper in the last week. In addition, 87 percent of those surveyed said they had read a newspaper published in their neighborhood or local community.⁶

"Newspapers here are not only very good, they have among the highest readership in the country," said Monroe. "We have a literate population and we have strong readership in the state."⁷

Barry Newton of Consumer Data Service, an Oklahoma-based company that does readership surveys for individual newspapers and newspaper associations, says Iowa readership does rank high when compared to most of the nation. The number of Iowans reading weekly newspapers is comparable to Nebraska, North and South Dakota and Wyoming, he said, with around 89 percent or more of all newspaper readers reading weeklies. The numbers fall off to about 78 percent in other states, he said.

According to Newton, the National Newspaper Association of America survey says that in a survey of people living in the top 25 communications markets, 62 percent read a daily newspaper and 66 percent read a Sunday paper. "I can almost bet that it'll be 10

⁵Staff report, "Ready For," *News Inc.*, Nov. 1991, special report, 2.

⁶Bill Monroe, executive director, Iowa Newspaper Association, telephone interview, Nov. 18, 1992.

⁷*Ibid.*

percent higher in non-metro dailies and weeklies, and in Iowa, Nebraska, the Dakotas and Wyoming, it'll be 10 percent higher again."⁸

But while researchers know the facts about weeklies, their circulation, readership and their money-making abilities, they are still learning why people read them and what weekly newspapers are trying to accomplish. While some research has examined weeklies, the weeklies frequently are compared to daily newspapers rather than being judged by how they accomplish their own goals and ambitions. Some researchers have questioned this approach, saying that weeklies have a different "raison d'être" than the dailies.⁹

"Weekly papers differ from dailies by being more local and less regional in nature and by focusing on the individual and groups more than issues and conflicts," concluded a 1992 study by Laakaniemi, Green and Jankowski.¹⁰

This thesis asks weekly newspaper editors to explain the "raison d'être" of their newspapers. But more, it asks them to use the standards they set themselves, to help draw a portrait of the excellent weekly newspaper in Iowa.

⁸Barry Newton, Consumer Data Service, Oklahoma Press Association, telephone interview, Nov. 18, 1993.

⁹George A. Gladney, "Newspaper Excellence: How editors of small and large papers judge quality," Newspaper Research Journal, Spring 1990, 69.

¹⁰Laakaniemi *et al*, 140.

Literature Review

Research and common sense suggest there are many quality daily newspapers in the United States. Further, researchers generally agree as to what makes them good — management commitment, strong coverage of community news and devotion to the canons of good journalism such as editorial independence, a strong editorial page and journalistic objectivity.

Look up community media in *Communication Abstract* for 1992 and you will find two entries, one describing an article on aboriginal broadcasting in Australia,¹¹ the other listing an article on the nuclear waste-dump site-selection process.¹²

The only publication that focuses entirely on weekly newspapers is *Grassroots Editor*, the publication of the International Society of Weekly Newspaper Editors, a group of weekly editors who are serious about editorial and opinion pages. However, both *Grassroots Editor* and the group it serves focus on editorial and opinion pages, rather than on the entire newspaper.¹³

There are articles in *Journalism Quarterly* that discuss the quality of newspapers in general. One such article sets out the problem of discussing quality newspapers in its opening paragraph.

It has been suggested that news media could be held more accountable if their products could be evaluated by

¹¹Thomas F. Gordon, ed., Communication Abstracts, (December 1992) lists Moinar, H., "Aboriginal broadcasting in Australia; a decade of development. Journal of Development Communication, Dec. 1991, 1-12.

¹²Gordon, ed., Communication Abstracts, (December 1992) lists Schweitzer, J.C. and Smith B.L., "community pressures and agenda setting: how west Texas newspapers covered the nuclear waste-dump site selection process." Newspaper Research Journal, Summer 1991, 46-63.

¹³Richard Lee of South Dakota State University, executive secretary of the International Society of Newspaper Editors, telephone interview, March 10, 1993.

quantifiable means and the scores published. The difficulty is finding quantifiable manifestations of quality work.¹⁴

The researchers seek to develop a relationship between newspapers that score well on various measures of editing and those that win Pulitzer Prizes. While they fail to establish such a strong relationship, they do advance the hypothesis that strong editing and Pulitzer Prizes are related more to the size of the newspaper than to other qualities.¹⁵

While the Meyer/Arant article looked at quantifiable means of defining excellence, it did not explore the more subjective definitions of excellence. It did not ask editors if they looked at editing excellence when identifying an excellent newspaper, it did not look at whether newspapers with good records of editing did a good job of covering the community's news, nor did it ask what editors considered a good job of covering the community's news.

Other studies did ask such questions.

A 1988 dissertation by Jeanne M. Abbott at the University of Missouri at Columbia devised a model for excellence for small daily newspapers. She developed a list of 30 terms from the existing literature that seemed to describe quality newspapers and then asked editors at every daily paper with a circulation under 50,000 nationwide to choose seven of those criteria that described the best newspapers in their states, seven that described their own newspapers and seven on which their newspapers needed to improve. In addition, 350 educators who were members of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication were asked to select seven of the criteria describing the best newspapers in their states, seven that described the overall strengths of newspapers in their states and seven that described areas where newspapers in their states needed to improve.¹⁶

¹⁴Philip Meyer and Morgan David Arant, "Use of an electronic database to evaluate newspaper editorial quality." Journalism Quarterly, Summer 1992, 447.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶Jeanne M. Abbott, "A model for excellence in small daily newspapers," Diss. University of Missouri at Columbia, 1988, 36-42. In November of 1987, Abbott surveyed the 1,356 newspapers listed in *Editor and Publisher Yearbook* with circulations under 50,000.

Both groups also were given a list of daily newspapers with circulations under 50,000 in their state. They were asked to name the three best newspapers on the list.

Abbott visited five of the newspapers that received several mentions in her survey and attracted attention in their own states as award winners.¹⁷

“Informing readers about local issues” was a vital characteristic of small daily newspapers, according to Abbott’s survey results. Editors ranked that statement as most descriptive of the best newspapers and second most descriptive of their own. “Has a high ratio of staff-written copy to wire service” was second in the descriptions of the best newspaper and first in the description of the editors’ papers. “Covering a majority of local events” finished third among statements describing both the best dailies and their own dailies.¹⁸

Editors said small daily newspapers needed to improve most in technology and graphics and said they do poorly at using photographs and graphics effectively and at using color to enhance presentation of their stories. They also said small dailies need to improve their staffs, their writing and their interpretation of news events.

Educators agreed that small dailies do a good job of informing readers thoroughly and carefully about vital local events and that they try to be complete by covering a majority of local events. They said small dailies need to improve in encouraging aggressive, courageous reporting when others want information suppressed and emphasizing interpretation, background and context for news events. Educators also said small dailies do not devote enough financial resources to their news departments and do not do a good job of reflecting differences in race, ethnic origins, religion, age, or gender or at covering issues of social injustice.¹⁹

¹⁷ The five newspapers ranked highest in Abbott’s survey were the Fredericksburg (Va.) *Free Lance-Star*, the Owensboro (Ky.) *Messenger-Inquirer*, the La Crosse (Wis.) *Tribune*, the Gwinnett Co. (Ga.) *Daily News* and the St. Cloud (Minn.) *Times*. *Ibid*, 105.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 79-81.

Another article that focused on small daily newspapers with circulations under 50,000 drew many of the same conclusions as Abbott's survey. Thomas Connery of the College of St. Thomas in St. Paul, Minn., asked editors of larger newspapers and educators to identify which papers with circulations under 50,000 were quality newspapers, perhaps meriting further study.

From this initial survey, Connery focused on six quality dailies, four more closely than the others. He determined that while "thorough news coverage of the community," "editorial page takes a strong stand," and "consistently attempts original reporting" were among the criteria used to select the better newspapers, management commitment is at the root of those criteria.²⁰

Connery cited factors such as commitment to reporter independence, professional development and self-evaluation as important factors in a general philosophy of management commitment.²¹

While both Connery and Abbott came up with the same basic characteristics describing quality daily newspapers under the circulation of 50,000, there were problems with both their surveys. Both asked editors to list the best newspapers in either a state or region. For many editors and educators, this was difficult, particularly when they were asked to identify newspapers within a region.

Good or outstanding small dailies are unlikely to be known outside of a relatively small geographic region even by those with a knowledge of newspaper journalism.²²

¹⁹*Ibid*, 89-91.

²⁰Thomas Connery, "Management commitment and the small daily," Newspaper Research Journal, Fall 1989, 63.

²¹*Ibid*, 65.

²²*Ibid*, 61.

Connery also suggested that attempting to develop a list of quality daily newspapers with circulations under 50,000 might have been part of the problem. While he and Abbott both identified several of the same newspapers as excellent, he noted that:

It is likely that compiling a valid list of the truly outstanding small dailies in the country would require using several means of identification, ultimately culminating in evaluations of the newspapers themselves based on a number of standards more objective than the perceptions of any group of observers.²³

Neither Connery nor Abbott offered any reason for defining “small” dailies as those with circulations under 50,000. Nor did they offer precise explanations of terms such as “editorial page takes a strong stand” or “consistently attempts in-depth reporting.”²⁴ What is more important for the purposes of this study, neither one related the results of their studies to weekly newspapers.

George A. Gladney resolved some of these problems in his survey on how editors of small and large papers judge quality. Gladney noted that journalists often hold newspapers large or small to the same demanding standards. But a review of the literature regarding the community press revealed

That small papers serve a somewhat different purpose or mission compared with large papers, and therefore might be expected to operate and perform differently. . . . This raised the suggestion that in search for the best small papers, one might want to pay attention to how editors of smaller papers perceive the mission or purpose of their newspaper, then perhaps modify or discount some of the big-paper standards accordingly.²⁵

Gladney surveyed 100 newspapers in four categories: large (140,000 plus), medium (30,000-139,999) and small (under 30,000) dailies and weekly newspapers from around the country. He did not ask respondents to identify quality newspapers. He simply

²³*Ibid*, 61.

²⁴*Ibid*, 64.

²⁵Gladney, “Newspaper Excellence.” 59-60.

asked them to rank in order of importance nine organizational standards and nine content standards. They also were asked to rate the importance of each standard as *essential*, *important but not essential* or *not particularly important*.

Gladney decided that editors of weeklies and various-sized dailies have different definitions of quality, and that while "editors do share common values, regardless of the size of their newspapers . . . editors of smaller papers evaluate newspaper excellence differently than do their big-paper counterparts."²⁶

While weekly editors said strong local coverage was most important to an excellent newspaper, as did editors at small and medium dailies, editors of large daily newspapers said accuracy was most important. The three other groups ranked accuracy second. The greatest divergence between editors of weeklies and other editors came on issues such as community leadership, which weekly editors ranked third and all groups of daily editors ranked sixth or less important. Weekly editors also said staff enterprise, editorial independence and staff professionalism were less important than the daily editors considered them. In addition, weekly editors said a standard called community press, which Gladney defined as emphasis on news coverage that focuses on common community values and gives readers a sense of individual existence and worth, was much more important than considered by the dailies.²⁷

While Gladney offered a look at what weekly newspaper editors consider important to a quality publication, he did not take the next step. While comparing the opinions of weekly newspaper editors to those of daily newspaper editors and noting the differences, Gladney did not determine the cause of those differences.

Several explanations may account for the editors' disagreement. First, all but one of the 18 standards was

²⁶*Ibid*, 68

²⁷*Ibid*, 68.

drawn from literature and prior survey criteria, that, as it turned out, involved mostly mid-size to large dailies and therefore may not properly reflect the values of smaller papers. Second, it may be that some small-town editors are untutored in the ways newspapers are evaluated in a profession dominated by journalists, educators and critics whose primary interest is the mid-size to large daily press. . . . Third, small papers may simply subscribe to lower standards than large papers. . . . Some of the disagreement among the editors may stem, in part, from divergent perceptions of a newspaper's role, its *raison d'être*.²⁸

Gladney says it is clear from his study that "small papers clearly see their primary mission as providing extensive, solid coverage of the local scene, including plenty of social news," and he suggests that perhaps editors of larger newspapers are the wrong people to ask about the quality of weekly newspapers. He points out that three of five editors responding to his survey said they had no work experience with a weekly and suggests that further research might be in order.²⁹

That further research began with the work of Laakaniemi *et al.* The three educators were the only ones in the available literature to focus solely on defining quality in weekly newspapers. They began their 1992 study with the premise that a good weekly newspaper is one that wins awards. Their challenge was to determine what characteristics the newspapers shared that allowed them to win those awards.

The researchers developed a list of 125 weekly newspapers from around the country that consistently won awards in state and national general excellence categories over the last three to five years. They asked the editors of those papers, "What do you do that other papers don't do to give you this record of consistently winning state or national awards?"³⁰

²⁸*Ibid*, 69.

²⁹*Ibid*, 70.

³⁰Laakaniemi *et al*, 141.

The 277 comments of the 54 editors responding to the survey created the beginnings of a guide for excellence for weekly newspapers. Responses were individually analyzed and categorized. The major categories emerging from the analysis were People, Planning, Purpose and Attention to Mechanics. They were ranked almost equally by the editors responding.³¹

People are vital to winning awards, agreed editors, with 74 comments (26.7 percent) saying that finding, managing and challenging people was key to their contest performance. Purpose — things like long-range planning, listening to readers, knowing the paper's role, leading through editorials and setting high standards — was mentioned 71 times or in 25.6 percent of the comments received. Attention to mechanics, like good graphics, interesting layouts, good writing, photos and editing, garnered 70 comments or 25.3 percent of the comments. Short-term planning of coverage, reader interests, received 50 comments, or 18 percent of those offered.³²

None of the studies cited here focuses strongly on a particular gathering of weeklies, where editors are likely to know the other weeklies in the state and be able to judge their quality. Most do offer, however, some consensus on the criteria that should fit any newspaper considered excellent. Those criteria can be applied to weekly newspapers in Iowa and serve as a basis for a model of excellence for those newspapers. This thesis attempts to finish devising such a model.

³¹*Ibid*, 141.

³²*Ibid*, 141-42.

CHAPTER 2

Methodology

While Jeanne Abbott's study looked at daily newspapers from around the nation with circulations under 50,000 and George Gladney explored newspapers of all sizes from around the country, the sample of this survey is much more tightly focused. The sample included 100 weekly newspapers in the state of Iowa, selected from the list of 290 weekly newspapers that are members of the Iowa Newspaper Association.

Participants were selected in two ways. First, every newspaper that had won points toward newspaper of the year in the Iowa Newspaper Association's Better Newspaper Contest from 1989 to 1992 was included. Second, every seventh newspaper that had not won points toward newspaper of the year was chosen from an alphabetical listing of newspapers in the INA membership book and added to the survey. These two steps resulted in a sample of 98 newspapers. Two more newspapers were selected at random to bring the total sample to 100 newspapers.

Winners of points in the newspaper-of-the-year competition were included in the survey because they are likely to be the better weekly newspapers. Iowa newspapers enter the newspaper-of-the-year contest by participating in the 12 contests sponsored each spring by the Iowa Newspaper Association: General excellence; best editorial page; best front page; best sports page; coverage of local government; coverage of agriculture; coverage of education; total newspaper design; community service; best special section, editorial content; and best of class advertising, a new contest added in 1992. Points toward newspaper of the year are awarded to newspapers finishing first, second or third in each contest. General excellence is the premier award for news and the scoring is 12 points for first place; eight points, second; and four points, third. In the other contests, considered of lesser importance than general excellence, scoring is six points for first place; four points,

second; and two points, third. The newspaper with the highest total points is the newspaper of the year.³³

The newspaper-of-the-year competition seeks to recognize the best newspaper overall, but the contest also recognizes that small newspapers should not be forced to compete against larger newspapers. Thus, newspapers in the competition are divided into four competition classes. Class IV is for newspapers with circulations over 8,001. Class IV now has only daily newspapers, although a weekly newspaper with a circulation within the guidelines would compete in Class IV. Class III is for daily and weekly newspapers with circulations between 3,501 and 8,000. Class II comprises papers with circulations of 1,751 to 3,500, while Class I takes in all newspapers with circulations below 1,750. The only time newspapers from the various classes are compared is when point totals are used to select the newspaper of the year. Thus a newspaper that dominates the Class II judging can win newspaper of the year over a much larger newspaper.³⁴

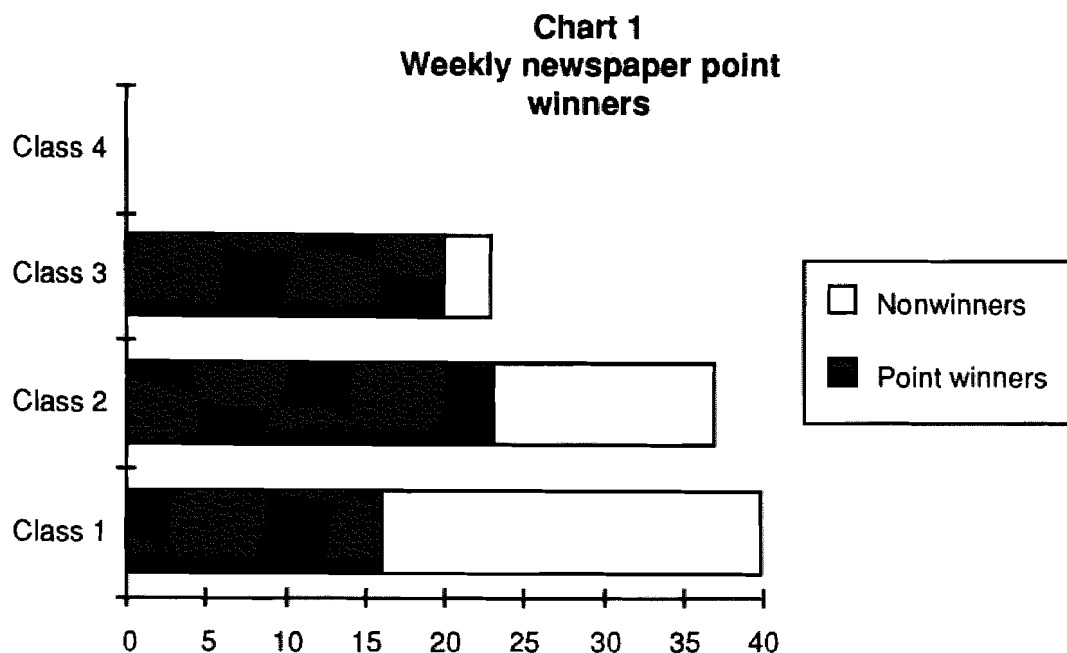
Under this system, newspapers of the three top circulation sizes have split the award over the years. Between 1984 and 1994, the competition has been dominated by the Cedar Rapids *Gazette*, a daily in Class IV, winning three times and *The N'West Iowa Review*, a weekly in Class III, winning five times. The 1992 award winner was the Dallas County *News*, a weekly newspaper in Class II.³⁵

Based upon contest results since 1989, the final sample included 41 newspapers that had not won awards and 59 that had. Overall, 23 Class III newspapers, 37 Class II newspapers and 40 Class I newspapers were included in the survey.

³³Iowa Newspaper Foundation, 1993 Better Newspaper Contests, Call for Entries, 1.

³⁴*Ibid.*

³⁵*Ibid.*



In addition to the newspaper editors, faculty members in journalism in Iowa also were surveyed. Letters were sent to the three state universities in Iowa, as well as to the 32 private institutions listed by the Iowa Association of Independent Colleges and Universities. In those schools where faculty members were identified as journalism or communication instructors, surveys were addressed to the named faculty members. In schools where there were no such faculty identified, surveys were addressed simply to "Journalism" at the name of the school. Forty-one letters were sent to individual faculty members and schools with permission to duplicate the surveys for appropriate individuals.

The survey instruments developed for this paper were based on those Abbott developed. Abbott derived her list of 30 statements from existing literature on print journalism, including textbooks, books on mass media analysis and discussion, and books on press evaluation, as well as earlier projects evaluating daily newspapers.³⁶

Her list of statements of quality:

³⁶Abbott, "A model for excellence," 37.

1. Has a high ratio of staff-written copy to wire service copy.
2. Encourages diversity of commentary on the editorial page.
3. Allows unlimited access to readers for community news.
4. Tries to be complete by covering a majority of local events.
5. Uses new technology to improve the product.
6. Informs readers thoroughly and carefully about vital local issues.
7. Balances negative news with positive news.
8. Provides broad coverage of social injustices.
9. Reports clearly, expertly and with authority.
10. Emphasizes interpretation, background and context for news events.
11. Invites reader participation with letters to the editor, action line, etc.
12. Encourages aggressive, courageous reporting when others want information suppressed.
13. Places a premium on compassion and sensitivity to feelings of readers.
14. Reflects differences in race, ethnic origin, religion, age, gender in the community.
15. Hires a competent staff, often with specialized skills.
16. Remains independent of influences by powerful people and organizations.
17. Uses photographs and graphics effectively as communication tools.
18. Provides public leadership for community projects.
19. Allocates a significant amount of space to news vs. advertising content.
20. Produces bright, colorful writing.
21. Prints news honestly and accurately.
22. Creates an informed electorate.
23. Devotes a generous amount of financial resources to the newsroom budget.
24. Recognizes the accomplishments of citizens and community groups.
25. Has a particular personality that identifies with the community.
26. Presents news in a clean, well-organized fashion.
27. Demonstrates no political biases in news coverage.
28. Insists on prompt, timely coverage of events and trends.
29. Uses color to enhance presentation of stories.
30. Has enough money to be a good newspaper.³⁷

While her list of statements of quality was developed with daily-newspaper editors in mind, many of the items included were mentioned in other surveys. Connery also asked respondents to rank statements on thorough coverage of the community, strong stands on the editorial page, effective design and makeup and strength of photojournalism.³⁸

But still, these surveys all focused on daily newspapers. The Laakaniemi survey did ask weekly editors what criteria they believed were necessary to win awards, but answers were grouped into very general categories. It determined that areas such as hiring a

³⁷*Ibid.*

³⁸Connery, "Management commitment and the small daily," 64.

good staff, leading the community through editorials, good graphics, good photos and interesting layouts were important to weekly newspaper editors.³⁹

Before using comments from these other surveys it seemed important to discover whether they related in some manner to the standards by which weekly newspapers are judged. Judges' comments from the annual Iowa Newspaper Association Better Newspaper Contests suggested that there is some correlation.

Each year a tabloid is published with the judges' explanation of what they liked about the winning entries. The use of color and importance of clean layout and strong photos reflected in Abbott's statements of quality is similar to comments from judges in the 1992 tabloid. In the best front-page competition judges said of the Class III first-place winner, "Wow! Local copy is well written. Great leads and solid headlines. Layout is clean. Photos are great. Fun to read."⁴⁰

The importance of leading the community through editorials also was recognized. "An editorial page full of locally-written editorials can't be denied." Use of color also is praised in comments on a number of winning entries.⁴¹

For this survey, the wording of Abbott's questions and statements was changed to reflect weekly rather than daily newspapers. In addition, two questions were dropped from Abbott's statements of quality and two new ones were substituted on the weekly version. Two of Abbott's statements describing quality newspapers were financial — one on whether the paper devotes a "generous amount of financial resources to the newsroom budget," the other on whether the paper "has enough money to be a good newspaper."⁴²

³⁹Laakaniemi *et al*, "Winning Weeklies: Common traits of award winners." Newspaper Research Journal, Winter/Spring 1992, 142.

⁴⁰Iowa Newspaper Association 1992 Better Newspaper Contest results, Best Front Page, April 1992, 3.

⁴¹Iowa Newspaper Association 1989 Better Newspaper Contest, Best Editorial Page, Best Front Page, April 1989, 2.

⁴²Abbott, "A model for excellence," 37.

Both of these were dropped because this survey was intended to focus on what qualities make up an excellent weekly newspaper, not on the resources needed for a quality paper, although in retrospect, there is likely value in exploring how the resources of a newspaper affect its quality.

Two statements used in Gladney's survey replaced the two dropped. One asked editors if it was important that a newspaper "Covers news from beyond the newspaper's immediate coverage area." Another issue, "remains independent of advertising influences on the news," also was suggested by Gladney.⁴³

The surveys were pretested, first with two reporters at *The Record-Herald and Indianola Tribune*, a Class III Iowa weekly.⁴⁴ After terms were clarified and technical errors with the surveys were corrected, additional pretesting was done with two former weekly editors who had since moved to daily newspapers.

Surveys were mailed in September of 1992. Each editor and educator received a cover letter explaining the survey and asking for help. Because the author of this study was, at the time, managing editor *The Record-Herald and Indianola Tribune*, newspaper listed among the weeklies editors could choose from, her name was not mentioned in the cover letter that accompanied the surveys. Instead, it was signed by Bill Monroe, executive director of the Iowa Newspaper Association, which funded the mailing costs of the project. The letter asked respondents to mail their returns to the author's home address within two weeks. The surveys (SEE APPENDIX) asked them to: (1) list the top three weekly newspapers from a list provided with the survey; (2) list the qualities that most described the best newspaper in the state as they had chosen in the first question; (3) list the overall strengths of their own newspapers; and (4) list the areas that could be improved at their newspapers.

⁴³Gladney, "Newspaper Excellence," 66.

⁴⁴The author of this thesis also is managing editor of *The Record-Herald*.

Educators were asked to list the overall strengths and weaknesses of weekly newspapers in Iowa rather than the strengths and weaknesses of their own newspapers.

Two weeks before the surveys were mailed, an article appeared in the *INA Confidential Bulletin*, a publication directed at publishers/editors who are members of the Iowa Newspaper Association, the same people who would fill out the surveys. The article announced the surveys, explained the purpose and asked the publishers who received a survey to participate. Surveys were mailed and 45 of the editor surveys were returned by the due date for an initial 45-percent response rate. Ten came in from educators for a response rate of just over 24 percent. A follow-up postcard went to all those who had received the original survey, thanking those who had replied, asking those who had not replied to respond and offering a phone number for any questions. This follow-up generated another five editor surveys and another three educator responses. An additional three editor responses were received about five weeks following the original mailing for a final response rate of 53 percent among editors and 31.7 percent among educators. Not all of those responding, however, completed the survey forms. Two educators responded with phone calls to explain why they would not complete the survey forms while some editors also said they felt unable to offer a knowledgeable response to some or all of the survey questions.

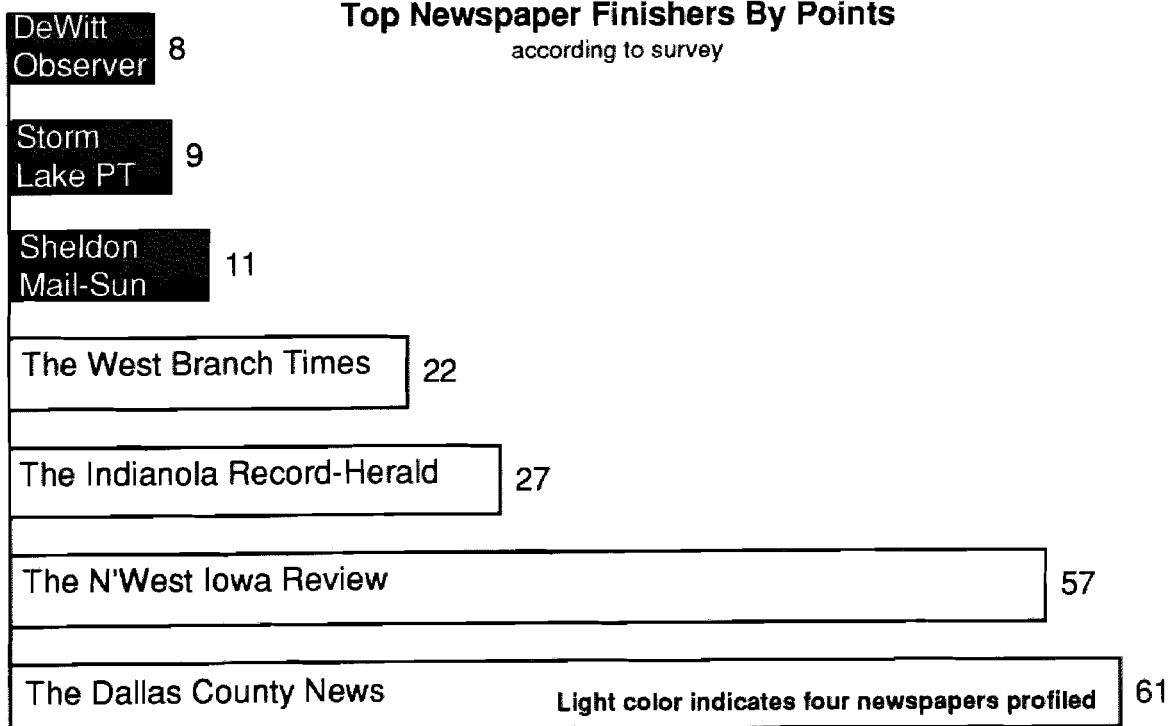
Once all the replies were received, the data were computerized and statistics run using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS).

CHAPTER 3 RESULTS FROM SURVEY Editors

In the 53 surveys returned by editors, 48 different weekly newspapers were mentioned among the top three newspapers in the state. But mentions of four newspapers rose clearly above the others — *The Dallas County News*, the 1992 newspaper of the year; *The N'West Iowa Review*, a seven-time winner of the newspaper-of-the-year award; *The Record-Herald and Indianola Tribune*; and *The West Branch Times*. The newspapers vary in size from West Branch, a Class I newspaper with a circulation of 1,425, to Indianola, the largest of the four papers with a circulation approaching 6,500.

Each time a newspaper was cited as the best newspaper in Iowa, it was awarded three points. Each time it was mentioned as second best, it got two points and each time it was noted as third best it received one point.

Chart 2
Top Newspaper Finishers By Points
according to survey



Other newspapers mentioned were (numbers are mentions, not points):

4 — Harlan *News-Advertiser*;

2 — Adair *News*, Albia *Union Republic*, Carroll *Today*, Decorah *Journal and Public Opinion*, Des Moines *Business Record*, North Scott *Press*, Glenwood *Opinion-Tribune*, Ida County *Courier*, Ogden *Reporter*, Red Oak *Express*, Spirit Lake *Beacon*, Tipton *Conservative* and Villisca *Review*.

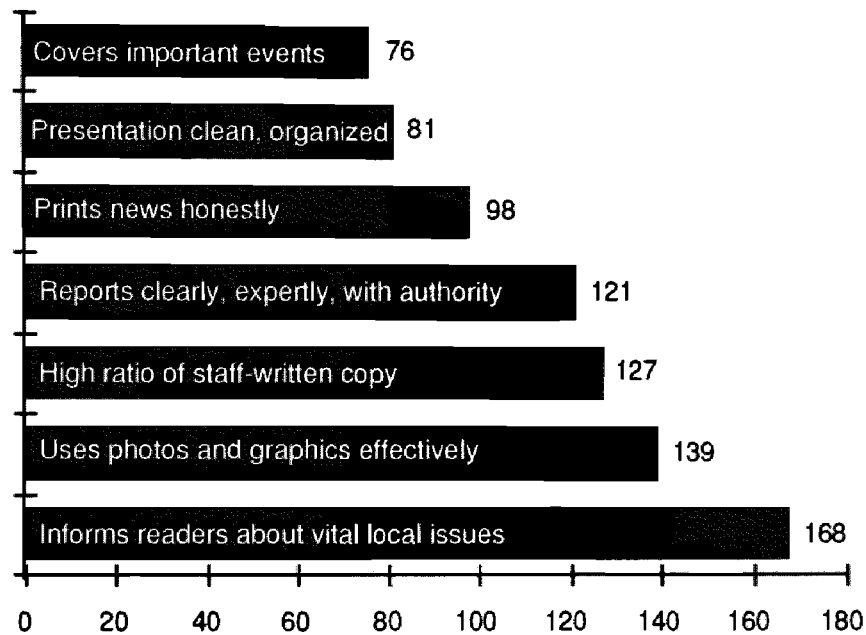
1 — Audubon *News Advocate*, the Avoca *Journal Herald*, The Algona *Upper Des Moines*, Bayard *News-Gazette*, Belle Plaine *Union*, Buffalo Center *Tribune*, Cascade *Pioneer-Advertiser*, Clarinda *Herald*, Dyersville *Commercial*, Clayton County *Register*, Forest City *Summitt*, Fremont *Gazette*, Grundy *Register*, Iowa Falls *Times-Citizen*, Calhoun County *Journal-Herald*, Lake Mills *Graphic*, Laurens *Sun*, Monticello *Express*, Mount Ayr *Record-News*, New Sharon *Star*, the Montezuma *Republic*, Nevada *Journal*, Oakland *Acorn Times*, Osceola *Sentinel Tribune*, Slater Tri-County *Times*, Sumner *Gazette*, Tama *News-Herald*, West Bend *Journal* and Williamsburg *Journal*.

After the participants had provided their choices for first-, second- and third-best newspapers in Iowa, they were asked to select from a list of 30 statements the seven criteria that best described the newspaper they chose as the best in the state. They were to place the statements in order of importance, with number one most important. Again, the responses were weighted. Each time an item was ranked number one it received 7 points; number two, 6 points; and so on.

Local news coverage, the appearance of the publication, and the professionalism of the staff dominated the top seven criteria describing the best weekly newspaper. Of the seven top criteria, three dealt with local news coverage, while two focused on the appearance of the newspaper and two others addressed the accuracy and skills of the reporters.

Chart 3
Top qualities of the best papers

according to survey



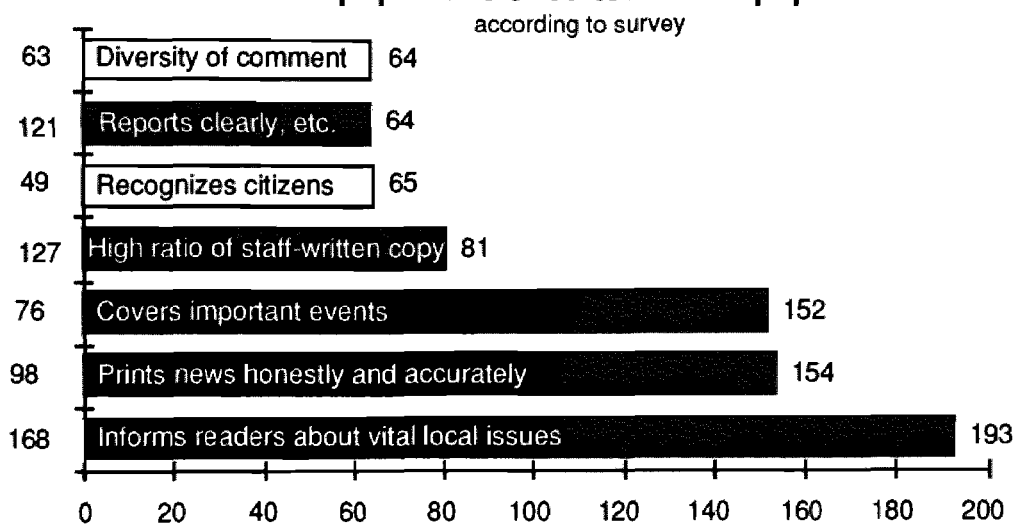
The standing of other comments follows with the number of points each received:

Diversity of comment	63
Hires a competent staff	52
Produces bright, colorful writing	51
Recognizes accomplishments of citizens	49
Emphasizes interpretation, background, context	47
Encourages aggressive, courageous reporting	46
Allows wide access for community news	44
Provides public leadership for community projects	44
Has personality that identifies with community	38
Independent of powerful people, organizations	35
Invites readers' participation	30
Allocates significant space to news vs. ads	26
Prompt, timely coverage of events, trends	25
Creates an informed electorate	21
Uses color to enhance presentation	21
Covers news from outside area	17
Uses new technology to improve product	17
Balances negative news with positive news	14
Independent of ad influences on news	11
Premium on compassion, sensitivity	5
No political biases in news coverage	3
Reflects differences in race, ethnic origin, etc.	2
Provides broad coverage of social injustices	0

Editors returned to the theme of local news coverage when asked what their own publications did well. The fifth question asked editors to list the seven strengths of their own newspapers, again in order from one, most descriptive, to seven.

In general, and perhaps predictably, editors ascribed to their own publications the same qualities they thought were important in the best newspapers in Iowa.

Chart 4
Top qualities of editors' newspapers



Comments in white boxes did not appear on list of top qualities of the best papers. They were replaced by "presentation clean, organized" and "uses photos and graphics effectively." Numbers to the left on the chart indicate points awarded in the top qualities of best papers portion of the survey.

A comparison of the characteristics and their rankings follows in order of popularity, not points, both for Iowa weekly newspapers in general and those weekly newspapers editors selected as "the best":

Characteristics

Informs readers about vital local issues
Prints news honestly and accurately
Covers important local events
High ratio of staff-written copy
Recognizes accomplishments of citizens

General Best

1 1
2 5
3 7
4 3
5 11

Reports clearly, expertly and with authority	6	4
Encourages diversity of comment	7	8
Provides public leadership for community projects	8	14
Balances negative news with positive news	9	25
Uses photographs and graphics effectively	10	2
Presentation is clean, well-organized	11	6
Encourages aggressive, courageous reporting	12	13
Invites reader participation	13	18
Allocates significant space to news vs. ads	14	19
Allows wide access for community news	15	14
Independent of powerful people, organizations	16	17
Has personality that identifies with community	17	16
Premium on compassion, sensitivity	18	27
Prompt, timely coverage of events, trends	19	20
Reflects differences in race, ethnic origin, etc.	20	29
Produces bright, colorful writing	21	10
Creates an informed electorate	22	21
Independent of ad influences on news	23	26
No political biases in news coverage	24	28
Emphasizes interpretation, background, context	25	12
Uses new technology to improve product	26	23
Covers news from outside area	27	23
Uses color to enhance presentation	28	21
Provides broad coverage of social injustices	29	30
Hires a competent staff	29	9

Upon inspection, the survey results show that what the editors valued in the best papers was what they tried to accomplish in their own. While editors listed photos and graphics as one of the seven things the best newspapers do well, 22 editors said their newspapers needed to improve the use of photos and graphics. Likewise, editors gave 21 points to “uses color to enhance presentation” when asked what the best newspapers do well, and gave an almost identical 26 points to the same statement when asked what they themselves needed to do better.

Editors gave 27 points to “produces bright, colorful writing” to make it one of the things they most needed to improve, while giving it 51 points when asked what the best newspapers do well.

The weekly newspaper editors also felt strongly about their role as community leaders, with 21 editors saying they needed to do better at providing public leadership for community projects. Nineteen of the editors said they needed to do better at using new technology while 18 said they wanted to do better emphasizing interpretation, background

and context for their readers. Fifteen editors said they needed to do better at providing broad coverage of social injustice.

Editors were most comfortable with their performance in subjective areas, with only one saying the paper needed to do better at printing news honestly and accurately and another one commenting that the paper needed to do better on keeping political biases out of news coverage. Three said their papers didn't do well enough at trying "to be complete by covering important local events" while four said their papers needed to do better at staying independent of influences by powerful people and organizations and at reporting clearly, expertly and with authority.

A comparison of those things newspaper editors thought they needed to improve in with those things that they said all newspapers do best follows:

Characteristics

	Need to imp.	Do best
Produces bright, colorful writing	1	21
Uses color to enhance presentation	2	28
Uses photographs and graphics effectively	3	10
Provides public leadership for community projects	4	8
Uses new technology to improve product	5	26
Emphasizes interpretation, background, context	6	25
Provides broad coverage of social injustices	7	29
Prompt, timely coverage of events, trends	8	19
Hires a competent staff	9	29
Reflects differences in race, ethnic origin, etc.	10	20
Independent of ad influences on news	11	23
High ratio of staff-written copy	11	4
Encourages diversity of comment	11	7
Invites reader participation	11	13
Premium on compassion and sensitivity	11	18
Presentation is clean, well-organized	16	11
Creates an informed electorate	16	22
Balances negative news with positive news	18	9
Allows wide access for community news	19	15
Allocates significant space to news vs. ads	19	14
Recognizes accomplishments of citizens	19	5
Has personality that identifies with community	22	17
Independent of powerful people, organizations	23	16
Reports clearly, expertly and with authority	23	6
Covers important local events	25	3
Prints news honestly	26	2
No political biases in news coverage	26	24
Informs readers about vital local issues	28	1
Encourages aggressive, courageous reporting	28	13
Covers news from outside area	28	27

Additional comments

A concern among some editors responding to the survey was that it did not sufficiently address the financial realities of weekly newspapers. "Although the listing of qualities seems extensive, it doesn't reflect the economics of the business," said one editor. "Many attributes of quality are beyond normal abilities of a newspaper serving a small localized market that is suffering from an extended economic downturn. Desire and pocketbook often don't match."⁴⁵

One editor said the financial strength of the newspaper is important, not just to the newspaper, but to the community. "If payroll isn't made and debts are not handled," the editor said, "one basic aspect of a newspaper hasn't been met."

But other editors were less concerned with the business aspects and more with the quality of the writing and appearance of their papers. One editor said the quality of writing at various newspapers had deteriorated, with "more emphasis on writing that is cute and colorful, and more often than not grammatically incorrect." This editor also said that many newspapers lack a distinctive style of their own.

Another editor agreed, saying newspapers need to work on modern design, including using boxes and headlines better. At the same time, the editor said, the newspaper should try to support community reforms, including changes in philosophy and progressive attitudes. Newspapers also need to do better at connecting with the community, said the editor, encouraging reader stories and submissions.

Educators

The number of surveys returned by educators was unsatisfactorily low. Of the 41 surveys sent to colleges and educators, only 14 educators were heard from. Six of those 14 said in letters, phone calls or on the forms that they felt they were unable to fill out the survey.

⁴⁵All comments from survey forms returned by editors in September 1992.

"We don't keep up with weekly newspapers," said Gilbert Cranberg, a professor at the University of Iowa who did not complete the survey.⁴⁶

"I feel completely unqualified to make informed responses on the questionnaire," added Kenneth Starck, director of the School of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of Iowa, another faculty member who did not complete the form. "I have seen only a handful of the papers listed, thus a response from me would be presumptuous, if not immoral."⁴⁷

But of the eight surveys that were filled out to some extent, responses were consistent with those that came from the weekly newspaper editors. West Branch and the *N' West Iowa Review*, two papers that scored highly among editors, also scored highly among educators. One educator listed Indianola as a top newspaper, and no educators mentioned the Dallas County paper.

Educators agreed with editors that one of the greatest strengths of weekly newspapers is coverage of local news.

⁴⁶Telephone interview with Gilbert Cranberg, September 1992.

⁴⁷Kenneth Starck, uncompleted survey form, returned September 1992.

CHAPTER 4

The newspapers

The four top newspapers selected by the editors of Iowa are much alike in a perceived dedication to and definition of quality. But their sizes, their histories and the ways they pursue quality differ considerably.

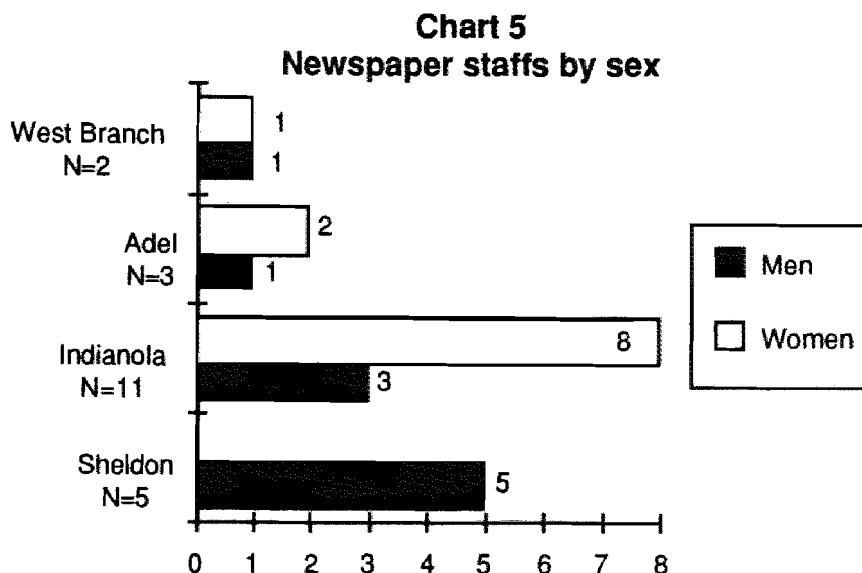
Three of the four are older newspapers, founded before the turn of the century and located within 20 miles of large metropolitan areas. *The N'West Iowa Review* in Sheldon, on the other hand, is a newspaper in its veritable infancy, founded only 20 years ago in the outer regions of northern Iowa. While the Dallas County and Indianola papers have proven attractive to corporate buyers, Peter Wagner is dedicated to the independence of *The N'West Iowa Review*, and his family is likely to carry that tradition into the next century. *The West Branch Times* had just been turned over to yet another independent owner in 1993 as this thesis was being written.

But the editors of all four newspapers said they rely on the independence of their newsrooms and the strength of their people for their excellence. The reputations of their newspapers attract good staff members, and the staffs help build the reputations of the newspapers. All four newspapers frequently win awards in the Iowa Newspaper Association Better Newspaper Contest. They demonstrate that size is no help, or deterrent to excellence, ranging from the Class I, three-person staff of *The West Branch Times* to the 12-person staff and 6,537 circulation of *The Record-Herald*.

This portion of the thesis will explore how these particular newspapers have become "excellent" and how their communities, their histories, their locations and their philosophies have made them excellent newspapers. Much of the information came from surveys of the newspaper staffs (See Appendix) and from visits to the newsrooms of the four papers and interviews with the publishers, editors and reporters.

Newsroom survey results

Staff members at the four top newspapers generally seemed happy in every part of their jobs, except salaries. Overall staffs at the four newspapers were almost evenly divided between men and women, with 10 men and 11 women working at the four papers.⁴⁸



The newspaper staffs ranged in size from 11 at Indianola — largely because it included in its staff numbers six typesetters and proofreaders — to three at West Branch (although only two responded to the survey). Thirteen of the 21 were in their 20s or younger. Five employees were in their 30s, while three were 40 or older.

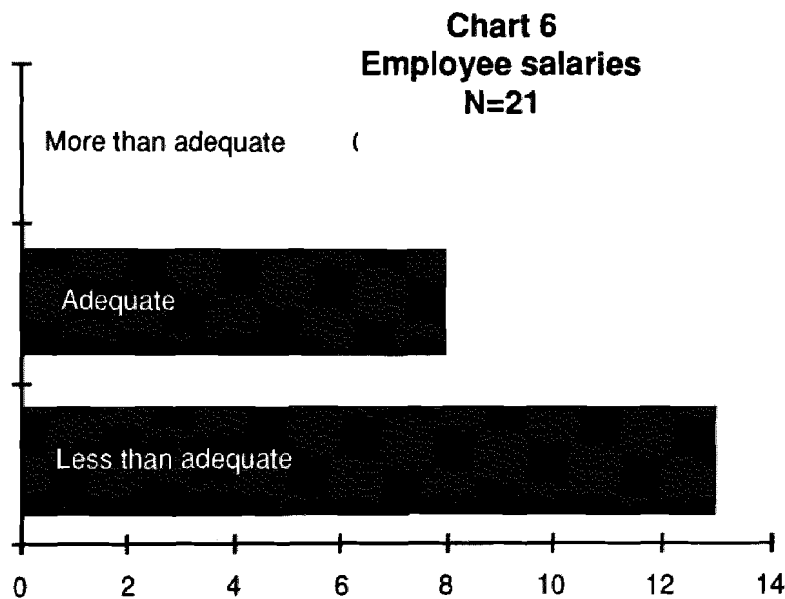
All of the employees at the top four newspapers had finished high school, with only three saying they did not attend college. Three said they had attended graduate school.

Most of weekly employees responding to the survey had been in journalism for five or fewer years. Three had been in journalism for only one year. Three more said they had been in the business for three years. Only four said they had been in the business 10 years or longer. While none had been with their particular employer for more than 10 years,

⁴⁸News staff members at all four of the best newspapers received survey forms. Forms were filled out and returned to the author anonymously.

seven of the 21 responding said they had been with their current employer for five years or more. Ten said they had been with their current employer for at least two years.

It is in terms of salary that employees showed their greatest discontent. Annual salaries ranged from about \$14,000 a year to close to \$19,000 for reporters. The salaries of the managing editors who responded to the salary question were in the low \$20,000 range or about \$1,666 per month. One managing editor had been in the current position for almost 10 years. Another had attended some graduate school. The owner of *The West Branch Times*, whose earnings were based on the financial picture of the newspaper, reported a salary ranging from \$8,000 to \$14,000.



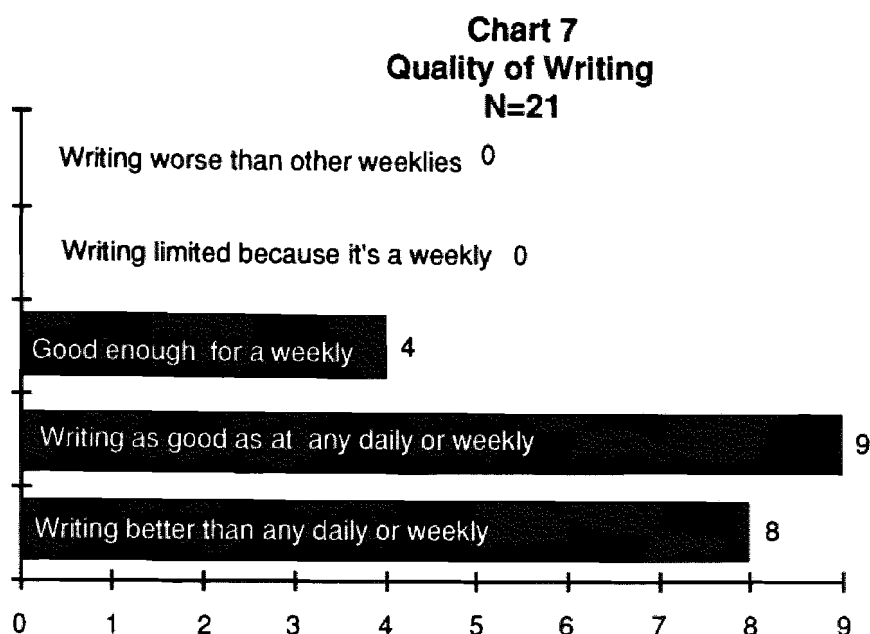
While 13 employees said their pay was less than adequate, 12, or 57 percent of those responding, said they work “harder than I’m expected to but without resentment.” Four, or 19 percent, said they work “much too hard” for their income. Again, only three, or 14 percent, said they worked the right amount for their money and no one responded to “doing less than one should or very little.”

Employees did see weekly newspapers as good places to get started. Twelve, or 57 percent, said they took their positions as “an excellent opportunity to use my skills.” Six,

or 28.5 percent, said their jobs were “an interim step” on their way to a better opportunity. Only one reported taking the position because nothing better was available.

Employees are fairly evenly split between those who planned to stay with their companies and those who planned to leave as soon as possible. While David Johnson of *The West Branch Times* had sold his newspaper and was in the process of leaving at the time of the survey, seven, or 33 percent, said they planned to remain with their present employer “several years or until I really need a change.” Another seven said they would stay “only until something better comes along.” Four said they would stay for a year, gaining experience for a more prestigious newspaper. Two said they planned to stay in their current positions indefinitely. Both had been with their present employers for more than four years, but one was a professional journalist (managing editor), the other a part-time proofreader and typsetter.

Money again came up when the 21 workers were asked why they would leave their jobs. While most (eight or 38 percent) said they could be lured away by a change in career, six, or 28.5 percent, said they would move for a bigger salary offer. Five, or 24 percent, said they would leave if the new newspaper were a daily.



Employees also felt good about the quality of their newspapers. Many said both the writing and photography at their newspapers were strong, with 11, or 52 percent saying that their photos were better than at other weeklies. Six, or 28.5 percent, said photos were as good as any newspaper in the state. Design also was strong, they said, with nine, or 43 percent, saying that the design and appearance of their newspaper was “as good as at any newspaper in the state.” Eleven said their paper’s appearance was “better than at other weeklies.”

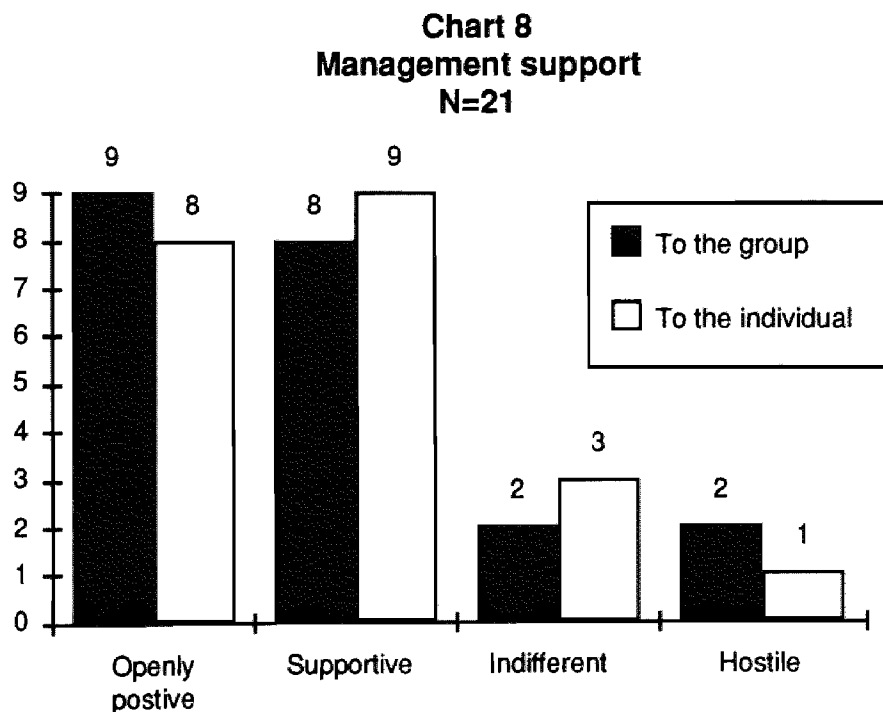
Staffers also felt good about the experience they are getting, with 11, or 52 percent, saying their experience at their newspaper was “as strong as it would be at any other newspaper in the state.” Seven, or 33 percent, said the experience was better than at most weeklies. Three said their experience was about what they expected from a weekly.

Employees at the top three newspapers all seem to be strong self-starters. When asked what motivated them, 71 percent (15 people) said doing their personal best. Four, or 19 percent, said they were motivated by giving readers information they need. Only one

person cited pleasing an editor as motivation while another cited getting the scoop on other media.

The 21 workers surveyed said most of their story ideas come both from their editors and ideas they develop themselves. Seven, or 33 percent, said they generated their own story ideas, while another seven said they get a number of story ideas from their editors as well as generating many of their own.

At the same time, the employees are getting feedback from their editors or publishers. Ten, or 48 percent, said they were satisfied with the feedback from their editors after stories or assignments were completed. Five, or 24 percent, said the feedback was adequate but they would like more while four or 19 percent said feedback is more than adequate.



Management as a whole was perceived as supportive of the news departments. While two people said management was indifferent to the efforts of the news department, and three said management was indifferent to their individual efforts, the two who called management “hostile” to the news department turned it into a compliment.

“Hostile meaning critical. Usually constructive,” said one comment. The other, offered by David Johnson, editor and reporter at *The West Branch Times*, said he was hostile toward the work of the editorial department “because I always expect better.” He said the same about his attitude toward his own performance, although the assistant editor at the newspaper said management was openly positive about her work.

Overall, employees were proud of their newspapers, with nine saying that their papers were as good as any newspaper in the state. Eleven said their papers were better than other weeklies in the state.

The Newspapers, Interviews

The consensus definition of a quality weekly newspaper seems fairly clear after examining the results of surveys of weekly newspaper editors and staffs at the “top” four weekly newspapers in the state. Good weekly newspapers cover local news. They cover it accurately and honestly, and they package it well.

Newsroom staffs said in their survey responses that they, like the editors, think their newspapers have good layout and design, strong photography and quality writing. They enjoy giving readers information they need, enjoy it so much that they all are willing to work for what they call, at best, adequate salaries.

But why?

Why is it that these four newspapers have been recognized as superior by their peers? What attracts good reporters to them? Is there something in the communities that allows or encourages them to be good newspapers?

Those are questions that the surveys do not answer, but the answers are needed to provide a comprehensive look at the excellent weekly newspaper. In the next portion of the thesis, which incorporates interviews with staff people, community members and others connected with the local newspaper, some of these questions are addressed.

The Dallas County News

Introduction

The Dallas County News, circulation 3,400, is published in Adel, a town of just over 3,000 surrounded by communities with even smaller populations. But Adel also is surrounded by wide open spaces that slowly are being eaten up by expensive housing developments. Residential growth is inching across the 22 miles separating Adel from U.S. Interstate 35. Already, the southeastern part of the county boasts a number of upscale subdivisions, and newspaper employees say many of their readers commute to jobs in Des Moines.

But in the fall of 1992, that explosive growth hit the newspaper when publisher Burl Tiedemann decided to sell the newspaper. What some called a bidding war for *The Dallas County News* and its circulation broke out between *The Des Moines Register*, a Gannett paper, and the Ames *Daily Tribune*, owned by Partnership Press, a war that Partnership Press eventually won.⁴⁹

Iowa Newspaper Association executive director Bill Monroe said he would like to believe the chase after the *News* was attributable to its editorial excellence — in 1992 the paper won the coveted Newspaper of the Year award from the INA. But that's not the answer, he said. "In that particular case, it's strictly geography," he said.⁵⁰

But Gary Gerlach, president of Partnership Press, said geography was only a part of the reason for the purchase. The county is contiguous to Boone, Story and Greene counties, where Partnership Press has properties, allowing the company to develop a continuous distribution system across counties, he said.⁵¹

⁴⁹Dale Kasler, "Dallas County News is hot property." *The Des Moines Register*, Aug. 19, 1992, 8S.

⁵⁰Phone interview, Bill Monroe, executive director, Iowa Newspaper Association, Nov. 18, 1992.

⁵¹All comments by Gary Gerlach come from an interview, Oct. 8, 1993.

In addition, "Dallas County is one of the five or six growth counties in the state, so that there's going to be a healthy economic environment for the next 10 or 20 years or more," Gerlach said. "And that kind of growth and economic development is important to sustaining good newspapering over the longer term."

Good newspapering was the third reason for buying the Adel newspaper, he said.

While the staff expected The Partnership Press to retain the local flavor of the newspaper, they acknowledged the sale meant change. The sale was also a blow to editor Beth Dalbey, who once had thought to purchase the paper herself. But the staff, from Dalbey on down, said they looked forward to the changes that accompanied the sale of the paper.

"Neither Gannett nor The Partnership Press are a threat to the survival of journalistic integrity that is the hallmark of *The Dallas County News*," wrote Dalbey in a September 1993 column. "Yes, there's some fear connected with the possibility of a sale. . . . If we fear anything, it is change. Think about what that word means: to alter, to make different. It's uncomfortable and all too often we define it only in the negative sense. Change also can mean progress and improvement; we forget that change is the first step in maximizing our potential."⁵²

The community

Between 1980 and 1990, Dallas County grew by only 242 residents. But in the 10 years before that, from 1970 to 1980, it blossomed from 26,085 to 29,513, an increase of more than 3,000 residents. Some statisticians expect that growth to continue, with residential population exceeding 33,000 by the end of the century. Others say population will remain steady or even decrease in the next 10 years.⁵³

⁵²Beth Dalbey, "When the newspaper is for sale. . .," *The Dallas County News*, Sept. 3, 1992.

⁵³Residents, 1990, and projected residents 2000-2010 in Iowa Counties, United States Census, Census Services, Department of Sociology, Iowa State University, Feb. 1991, 18.

Dallas County leaders say growth is certain to continue, and county residents will be swept along in the tide if they don't prepare.

"For most people it's a question not of if we're going to change, but can we control change," said Liz Garst, chief executive officer and chair of the board of the Raccoon State Bank in Adel. "Historical trends are occurring right now that no matter what we do are going to happen to us."⁵⁴

Those changes include growth in West Des Moines and other western suburbs of the capital city. John Schiffel, head of Dallas County Development in Perry, said that already cities like West Des Moines, Clive and Urbandale have sprawled across the county border into Dallas County. While a few business offices are following, the growth tends to be residential, which can be difficult for a town or a county.

"If you have a house that's built, a certain number of taxes are collected on that home," he said. "If you have children and expenses for those children in school, residential development doesn't always pay its own way. You have to balance your residential growth with good business growth and have the services for those people."⁵⁵

Purely residential growth also is hard on businesses, said Garst. When residential taxes don't cover the needs of the residential community, the business community often is called upon to fill the gap.

"Residential growth is very needy," she said. "Business, on the other hand, pays a disproportionate amount of taxes for the services they require. Tax burdens here (in Adel) are very heavy and growing. We're not interested in promoting or subsidizing residential growth. We're getting that. We need business growth that subsidizes residential growth."

⁵⁴All comments by Liz Garst come from a Nov. 19, 1992, phone interview.

⁵⁵All comments by John Schiffel come from a Nov. 19, 1992, phone interview.

Toward that end, Adel, the Dallas County county seat, does not offer tax incentives for home construction or improvements. It is, however, trying to attract more business and it is having some success. Garst hoped to promote business growth with projects like the Highway 6 Committee, which she headed. This group wants to improve access to U.S. Interstate 35, just east of the county, even further by widening the current two-lane access highway to four lanes. The county also brought in a countywide development director and revamped its water and sewer services. Garst also noted growth in Redfield, and some new industry in Dallas Center. Growth in Adel itself has been slow, "but we're going somewhere." Jim Sanders, Adel city administrator, cited a second Casey's store opening in Adel and a new Subway sandwich shop. Two new mini-storage businesses were to open soon.⁵⁶

Retail business in Adel was hurt badly by the construction of Valley West Mall, less than 30 miles away by highway, he added. Two grocery stores, a hardware store, three car dealerships and a flower shop were among the businesses ranging the brick streets of downtown Adel. Many of the store fronts in the business district were occupied by county offices that no longer fit in the courthouse in the center of the square. A Ben Franklin store, a couple of pharmacies and one dress shop rounded out retail shopping in the town. The community also provides employment, if not shopping, at a local lumberyard and brickyard.

A new \$2.5 million brew pub, though, has opened new possibilities for the community, said Garst. In addition to providing about 40 jobs for local residents, it opened new lines for development.

"It's kind of staking out a new path for this community," she said. "We've been arguing about this new path for years — things like should we keep our brick streets? For now, charm has won."

⁵⁶All comments from Jim Sanders come from a Nov. 5, 1992, phone interview.

Garst hopes to see the community build on its charm — its courthouse, its brick streets, and now its brew pub — to create a unique community for commuters who live in Dallas County and for metro residents who visit it. While she sees Adel becoming a “destination community” — a place people visit for a day to pedal the bike path to the brew pub and explore other unique features of the town — she said such a fate might not be the best thing for Adel.

“It’s hard to be a bedroom community,” she said. “It’s hard on the soul of a town if everyone leaves during the day. We’d like to have jobs here.”

The brew pub that Garst saw as a cornerstone to Adel’s new path was once the Chicago, Milwaukee, St. Paul Railroad depot in Adel. In 1991, the Depot was purchased by the Dallas County Brewing Co., which refurbished the 1906 vintage building and turned it into the home of the Old Depot Restaurant and Pub. While the restaurant offers a classy dining experience to visitors and residents, across a bike path in the former Ideal Sunbonnet and Corn Husking glove factory, a brewery is pumping out about 3,000 barrels of beer annually. The brew pub and the restaurant took old buildings that local residents considered eyesores and turned them into community centers.⁵⁷

All of this growth has been accomplished over the protests of some local residents.

“There’s disagreement about it,” said Garst. “There are people who want it to be like it was in 1950, but most people realize that if we do nothing, it’s still going to change.”

The city council takes a conservative view toward growth and is careful to consider the feelings of the longtime residents. “People who have lived here for years and years are less likely to accept the growth,” said Sanders. “The city council has accepted that we’re going to grow, but we want to control the growth. We don’t want to get caught where we have tremendous growth without being able to provide the services. Communities like ours struggle to keep their identity. We’re just trying to figure out our niche.”

⁵⁷Beth Dalbey, “Vision,” *The Dallas County News*, Oct. 8, 1992.

The newspaper: History and position

The Dallas County News is a key player in that struggle, said community leaders. It is also a longtime player in the community, founded as a Republican newspaper in 1872. It was merged in 1929 with *The Dallas County Record*, which in the early part of the century had been called *The Dallas County Democrat*. In 1965, J. B. Tiedemann took over, and the move toward a more modern newspaper began.

Tiedemann was a Phi Beta Kappa graduate in history from the University of Iowa in 1939 and he readily admits he did not start out to be a newspaperman. He gravitated toward journalism after moving to Redfield in Dallas County early in the 1950s. When he found himself out of work in 1955, he remembered his childhood love for newspapers and went to work at the *Dexfield Review-Sentinel*, working in the pressroom and helping to lay out the paper. In 1964 he bought the newspaper and a year later he purchased the *Dallas County News*. For years he left the Adel paper largely in the hands of its editor, George DeFord. He returned to Adel when DeFord died in 1982.⁵⁸

But even before Tiedemann moved his office to Adel, he was dragging the *News* into the 20th century. He introduced offset printing in the Redfield newspaper in 1962, one of the first newspapers in Iowa to do so. In 1966, he brought offset to the *News* and in 1969 he took the paper to computerized typesetting. Tiedemann said he enjoyed the technology for itself, as well as what it did for the paper.

"I can almost regard computers as a hobby of mine," Tiedemann said in an interview that appeared in the *News* after he was named Master Editor Publisher by the Iowa Newspaper Association in 1990. "Even if it's 50/50 whether it will pay out, I would tend to buy a computer just for the personal satisfaction of learning to use it."⁵⁹

⁵⁸Beth Dalbey, "Peers call publisher a 'master'," *The Dallas County News*, April 12, 1990.

⁵⁹*Ibid.*

Tiedemann also changed the look of the paper, using a modular system of layout and encouraging layout people to use downstyle headlines.⁶⁰ Those changes weren't always popular.

"It was tough when we changed our newspaper style," recalled Tiedemann. "I can remember one lady saying 'I saw a great paper. They had 19 or 20 stories on the front page.' She thought that was how a newspaper should be. Now they think this is how a newspaper should be."

Perhaps most important of all, Tiedemann brought to the newspaper a strong belief in aggressive community journalism. That belief is a mixed blessing in Adel, said Liz Garst.

"Adel has a long history of fights," she said. The battles range from whether the town should keep its brick streets to what it should do about the county recorder who moved to North Carolina, neglecting to first resign his taxpayer-supported position in Adel. "There's a remarkable stream of controversies that arise out of this county. The newspaper is on top of the facts and it disseminates them," she said. "In the town where I grew up nobody had enough facts to fight about them. Here, they do."

Garst calls the newspaper fearless. Dalbey just calls it good journalism.

It wasn't easy at first, she recalled. "We had to go through some education to teach the community what a newspaper should be. We had to educate them that they deserve to know things."⁶¹

That education began in the late 1970s, with the newspaper's first professional editors. Dalbey came in 1982, soon after Tiedemann had moved to the Adel newspaper. The two built on the foundation laid by earlier professional editors, gave the paper an

⁶⁰Downstyle headlines are headlines that use primarily lower-case letters to start each word. For many years, newspapers preferred to start almost every word of a headline with capital letters.

⁶¹Phone interview, Beth Dalbey, Nov. 10, 1992.

editorial page and continued to harden the news coverage. They also expanded their focus beyond Adel.

"That's one of the things we've changed since we took over," said Tiedemann. "When we bought it, it was primarily an Adel newspaper. Now we cover news from all the towns, Dallas Center, Waukee."⁶²

And they cover all the news from those towns. Dalbey and Tiedemann said the paper strives to combine the old chicken-dinner news with a new community journalism.

"This paper has a very unique identity," Dalbey said. "People know that we're gutsy and feisty and don't kowtow to our advertisers. But there're a lot of people who take the newspaper for that chicken-dinner news, though they're becoming a lower percentage of our circulation. In some ways we're a traditional weekly, but we're on the cutting edge in some other things."⁶³

One area where Adel is on the cutting edge is in aggressive coverage of its community. The newspaper took on county officials, covering the departure of the county recorder. It helped expose a city council member who allegedly beat his wife. A subsequent series on domestic abuse led to the formation of an organization dedicated to working with victims of the crime. The newspaper gave its readers in-depth coverage of two drug-related murders in the county, from the discovery of the bodies through the convictions of the killers and their eventual appeals.

Dalbey said the decision to strengthen government coverage was a conscious one. "I looked at the city council stories from years ago and it was apparent to me that they just used the public records, the minutes," she said. "The really full-blown features are new."

⁶²Unless otherwise indicated, all comments from J.B. Tiedemann come from a personal interview with him, Nov. 12, 1992.

⁶³Phone interview, Beth Dalbey, Nov. 10, 1992.

Also new is the editorial page, an element *The News* lacked until Dalbey came to the paper. Today, the page is a strong and entertaining one, usually including at least one local editorial, a syndicated cartoon and columns from at least two of the newspaper's three writers. The paper also receives several letters to the editor, some praising some aspect of Adel, others blasting the newspaper for its news coverage.

But while the editorial page states strong opinions, Tiedemann and Dalbey emphasized keeping those opinions out of the news pages.

"We don't take sides," said Tiedemann. "People appreciate that. I'm Democratic by politics, but I've had Republican friends say they don't see any bias in the way we cover news and they appreciate that. We've gained a lot of respect over the years and people believe what we print."

And they read it, said Garst.

"The newspaper is a very important player in this community and in the county," she said. "It is the center of discourse. I was just sitting down to read it in the middle of the workday when I don't have time. It's a center of life in the community, so you read it — sooner rather than later."

The community isn't the only group that recognizes and respects the newspaper. In 1992, the paper won the INA newspaper-of-the-year award, a trophy it had consciously planned to win.

"We take our contests seriously here," said Tiedemann. "It's a challenge . . . a conscious thing. I think it's worthy too. It's like students pointing to a test. The tests aren't everything, but they encourage students to study harder."

The newspaper: Staff and structure

In Adel, the “students” to whom Tiedemann referred were the news staff of three. They took their lessons largely from the contests that they worked to win. In 1990, Dalbey and Jeff Abbas, a reporter, decided to win newspaper of the year. Once that decision was made, said Abbas, they had to decide how to go about it.

“We looked at the contests,” said Dalbey. “The contests recognize everything that newspapers should be doing. It provides a framework. We should be covering education, we should be covering government, all the areas. We looked at where are we meeting that responsibility that the press has?”⁶⁴

More important, they looked at where they weren’t meeting that responsibility and struggled to improve in those areas. A first step was adding another reporter.

“We hired another reporter for better news coverage,” said Tiedemann. “I didn’t see any immediate economic impact. It’s a longtime thing. You figure that in time, if you have a better product, you show a better profit.”

Joanna Werch, the new reporter, allowed the newspaper to increase its coverage of the small towns in its area. With seven communities in *The News*’ coverage area, Dalbey said it was impossible for one person to cover all the city council meetings or school boards. Instead, each reporter covered a city council, including the sports reporter. Two reporters kept tabs on the school boards while Dalbey and Werch shared responsibility for the county government. Werch also handled the police beat, as well as much of the community “chicken dinner” news.

Over time, Dalbey said, she would like to see the chicken-dinner news disappear. “It is my least favorite part of the newspaper,” she said. “But I think its importance in the

⁶⁴Unless otherwise indicated, all comments from staff members of the *Dallas County News* (Beth Dalbey, Joanna Werch and Jeff Abbas) come from personal interviews conducted during a visit to the newspaper Nov. 12, 1992.

newspaper will gradually dwindle. I don't think you have to go in and shoot it. It will die a natural death."

The week for the news staff begins on Thursday morning when Dalbey and her two reporters sit down to discuss stories. While Dalbey makes some assignments, Abbas and Werch also come up with many of their own ideas. On Friday, the staff schedules appointments for photos and interviews. In addition to writing stories for the paper, the staff members also type most of their own filler material, with Werch entering the community columns, Dalbey typing in the court news and Abbas concentrating on the sports pages.

They also handle their own layout on Macintosh computers, beginning Wednesday; on Thursday, the meeting, writing and layout cycle begins all over again for the next week's paper. The paper was available for counter sales on Thursday and arrived in the mail on Friday, although plans to move to direct delivery through newspaper carriers were under way. It runs from 16 to 18 pages and contains primarily news. *The Roundup*, the newspaper's companion shopper, carries most of the advertising, said Tiedemann.

While the paper isn't heavily departmentalized, the news, features and sports are organized for easy reading. The front page carries the local town news: a murder in the county, a lawsuit filed against the city council to stop a paving project, an eventful city council meeting. The second page is the opinion page, which features a local editorial as well as at least two columns, one by Dalbey and another by a reporter or other staff member.

The columns are an important part of familiarizing the community with the staff, Dalbey said. "We can chart our destiny through some of this," she said. "I think people through reading the personal columns, get to know that Joanna Werch has a real dry wit Through those columns people get to know who we are."

That is important in a town that clings to its traditions. While Werch grew up in Dallas Center, not far from Adel, Dalbey came to the community from Shenandoah, a

couple of hours away to the southwest, and Abbas moved there after working at the paper for a couple of years and commuting from West Des Moines. Living in town makes a difference, he said.

"You get to know the people in the community better when you live among them," he said. "They look at me more as part of the community than as an outsider coming to work here, and maybe they're more willing to cooperate with me because of that."

The one member of the newspaper who has lived in the community for decades is Tiedemann. But he does not rely on those years of familiarity to tell him, or staff members, what the community will tolerate or how to present their newspaper. Instead, he said he encourages his staff to try new things and take new chances. He described his job as facilitator or cheerleader. Dalbey and her staff said they appreciated that relationship.

"Burl may plant a few seeds, but he makes it seem like it's your idea," said Abbas. "He'll suggest something and then pretend like it's your idea and you take it from there. But he never comes out and said, 'I want you to do this.' He doesn't operate that way."

"If I have any secret, it's letting people do their thing," said Tiedemann. "I've always decentralized authority. People get a kick out of doing their own thing. They like that sense of accomplishment."

And then Tiedemann rewarded it. Under him, salary reviews occurred annually, but were informal. Raises were discussed in February. "The reason was because in January, Burl had his calendar year end and didn't get his statements from his accountant until then," Dalbey explained. Before the sale, she worked with Tiedemann to determine what kinds of raises her employees should receive, as did other department heads. Tiedemann liked to give cost-of-living increases, said Dalbey, but frequently the raises were higher. Dalbey said Tiedemann's salary increases paid off for employees and for the newspaper. At the time of this interview, no decision had been made on how salary reviews would be handled under the new ownership.

"The attitude of the employees has a lot to do with winning newspaper of the year," Dalbey said. "If you can keep your staff intact and happy, you'll do well."

The future

"The future" at *The Dallas County News* was rapidly becoming its present. In 1993 the paper became part of The Partnership Press, an Iowa-based media company that operates the *Ames Daily Tribune* and a number of small weeklies and shoppers around Iowa. Tiedemann remained as publisher, a factor that counted in his decision to sell. Sometimes, he admitted, retirement seemed enticing. "But the paper sort of organizes your day. I come in and open the mail and even though I don't give a lot of orders, I know what's going on," Tiedemann said.

Dalbey said she did see the potential for some negative community reaction to the sale. "But if you recognize the potential for a problem going in, then you can take care of it," she said.

That was something Gerlach said his company was doing. The first step, he said, was to ease the various constituencies of the newspaper through the transition. "I'm not sure that readers notice much of these things, unless there are dramatic changes to their newspaper. We haven't proposed many dramatic changes."⁶⁵

The editorial department, for instance, he added, was to continue with Dalbey and Tiedemann in leadership roles. "We see a good deal of continuity as part of our strategy," Gerlach said.

Dalbey agreed. "Our philosophy is not going to magically change because we have a different owner," she said. "I think that's one of the things that makes people want to buy this newspaper, because of the commitment to quality and the philosophy. I think that's one of the things that makes it attractive."

⁶⁵Gerlach, personal interview, Oct. 8, 1993.

Gerlach said the quality of the newspaper makes it safe to leave the editorial department largely as is. Change already has come to the revenue departments, with new advertising representatives joining the newspaper.

"It was our analysis that the newspaper was dramatically underserving that area of the constituency," Gerlach said. "There was something between poor service and no service — kind of a life-threatening situation for a newspaper."

But while lineage and advertising both are up, Gerlach said, the paper also needs to increase circulation. That may be more of a challenge, he added.

With the rapidly growing population, Gerlach said the traditional means of distributing the newspaper may not be enough. The Partnership Press distributes a free newspaper in Boone, and Gerlach said that similar free distribution of *The Dallas County News* could be a possibility.

Growth in circulation could provoke growth in editorial, including additional staff, said Gerlach. Tiedemann said he would like to see the newspaper expand its coverage, increasing the space devoted to the outlying communities of Dallas County. Mostly, though, he said he would like to see the paper improve.

No one was willing to see the newspaper rest on its laurels. "We got newspaper of the year this year, but I don't think we're done by any stretch of the imagination in terms of improving," said Dalbey. "I grew up in a community that had no source of local news and you see how that plays out in society when people aren't informed."

"It's that simple with me. I don't think small towns need to be small time."

The N'West Iowa Review

Introduction

Its employees call it "the best newspaper in the whole world." And others agree that *The N'West Iowa Review* is at least the best newspaper in Iowa. Only 20 years old, the newspaper earned newspaper-of-the-year honors seven times between 1982 and 1994. In the 1992 National Newspaper Association's better newspaper contests, the *Review* captured 10 awards, more than any other newspaper in the state.

The Review is unique among the top four newspapers named by editors in this survey because it is the only privately-owned newspaper not facing a sale. It is far from the charmed circle of the Des Moines metropolitan area and it is the only newspaper of the four that shares its staff with another publication.

But the differences are more fundamental. Unlike *The Dallas County News* or *The Record-Herald and Indianola Tribune*, the *Review* was founded as a regional newspaper hoping to "bring to upper Northwest Iowa a new knowledge of the world around us . . . and an appreciation of the good life in the five-county area."⁶⁶

Since Peter Wagner wrote those words on the first day of publication in July of 1972 some things have changed. The paper originally came out on Sunday, it now comes out on Saturday. The paper originally covered a five-county region; now it focuses on four.⁶⁷ But by 1993, its dedication to binding northwest Iowa into a single region had not changed. Nor has its quality.

The community

The Review is just barely in Iowa. Founded in Sibley, it soon moved to Sheldon — 30 miles south of Worthington, Minn., where the paper is printed, and about

⁶⁶Peter Wagner, "Straight Talk: Greetings," *The Sunday Review*, Sunday, July 2, 1972.

⁶⁷*The N'West Iowa Review* also covers a small portion of Nobles County, Minn., but no longer includes it in its primary coverage area. Jeff Wagner, telephone interview, by author, Oct. 5, 1993.

30 miles east of South Dakota. Publisher Peter Wagner didn't believe the people of Sheldon, or of Sibley, or of the dozens of tiny towns surrounding them, were well served by the daily newspapers in places like Cherokee, Sioux City or Worthington, Minn. So he resolved to start his own regional publication.

"We felt there was a need for this four-county area to have a newspaper that shares the common problems and ideas of all the communities," he said.⁶⁸

In 1993, the newspaper served primarily four counties, Sioux, Lyon, O'Brien and Osceola, with a total population of about 65,000. While the towns within that region have long competed for retail dollars and basketball championships, they also are bound by their German and Dutch heritage, by their religious conservatism, and by their fanaticism for athletics.

But more basically than that, said Larry Keltto, managing editor, they are bound by "a bit of an inferiority complex."

"It's kind of a quirky region," he said. "It has a sense that it's ignored by the rest of the state. The governor will talk about northwest Iowa and be referring to Fort Dodge. Probably nothing here makes people more happy than when one of its youth goes away to college and works and then comes back. They practically have a parade for people like that."

And they need those people, said former *Review* managing editor Jay Wagner. The community boasts only 2 percent unemployment, said Wagner, a bonus in most towns but a turnoff to industry looking for a large labor pool. Worse, the number of young people in northwest Iowa is declining as well.

⁶⁸Unless otherwise noted, comments by Peter Wagner and other staff members of *The N' West Iowa Review* were made during personal interviews during a visit to the newspaper Dec. 9, 1992.

"A lot of northwest Iowa is getting old," said Jay Wagner. "It's hard to attract industry because of the lack of infrastructure and the low labor pool. There're no four-lane roads and a real reluctance to change with the times."⁶⁹

Leadership had not always helped, said Keltto. "It's kind of like a car going down the road looking one way and not noticing the deer crossing in front of it," he explained. "Now it's right on the deer, and it's heading for some real serious financial decisions."

One of those was the decision to spend \$11,000 to recount Sheldon's population for the United States Census. The 1990 census showed O'Brien County losing more than 1,500 residents since 1980, dropping more than 2,000 since 1970.⁷⁰

Such population losses could have meant the loss of state and federal dollars. "The Sheldon council is spending the money (to redo the census) because the town's population dropped under 5,000," said Daryl Burns, head of the town's Edward D. Jones company. "It's so critical for funding that it's being done."⁷¹

Businesses around the region also had been on a downhill slide. When Peter Wagner started his shopper in Sibley in 1962, he counted 91 businesses in the small town. By 1993, there were between six and 10. Ashton, Iowa, had lost almost all of its businesses since 1980, except a bank that still was hanging on, and still occasionally advertised.

Sheldon itself had been somewhat protected from those declines. At the junction of U.S. Highway 18 and Iowa Highway 60, Sheldon was the largest retail center for miles, boasting a community college, Northern Iowa Area Community College, a hospital and a host of retail businesses. The community college brought in faculty and students, many of whom were preparing for new careers after layoffs at plants around the area. A local co-op,

⁶⁹All comments by Jay Wagner were made during a telephone interview, Nov. 18, 1992.

⁷⁰Residents, 1990, and projected residents 2000-2010 in Iowa Counties, United States Census, Census Services, Department Sociology, Iowa State University, Feb. 1991, 18.

⁷¹All comments by Daryl Burns come from a telephone interview in December, 1992.

a machine and tool business, and a couple of light assembly plants round out the major employers in Sheldon. On the plus side, the nearest large cities, Sioux City and Sioux Falls, are about 60 miles away. While many residents shopped and worked in those communities, residents of the smaller towns around Sheldon relied on the community for much of their retail needs.

The community had faced a lack of new housing, but new construction was starting again by 1993, said Burns. The town also offered tax-increment financing, cutting taxes on increased valuations in new homes or businesses and bonds to develop its infrastructure. The city hoped to pay back the bonds with tax differential rather than from the city or county coffers, said Burns.

The town sought new grocery stores to supplement the community's Hy-Vee and Joyce's food stores. A new bakery was coming in, to help make up for the loss five years ago of a large clothing and shoe store, said Burns.

And there were dreams in Sheldon. Someday, promised Iowa Department of Transportation officials, Sioux City residents will be able to hop on Iowa Highway 60 and drive on a four-lane highway all the way from Sioux City to Sheldon and on to Minneapolis, but that dream is at least 25 years in the future, and while the road may bring more travelers to Sheldon, it also will make it easier for residents to shop elsewhere.

Peter Wagner was preparing for that. "We've realized people are going to run away. Henry Ford changed everything when he invented the automobile (sic). Blame him if you want for the death of the small town."

When shoppers cannot find what they want in the town, they drive. Wagner and his regional approach to newspapering planned to take advantage of that trend.

The newspaper: History and position

The N' West Iowa Review cannot be discussed without talking about the region of northwest Iowa and without talking about sports. The staff said that, the publisher said

that, and the basketball games featured continuously on every radio station along U.S. Highway 59 north of Interstate 80 on a Tuesday evening said that.

Founded in 1972, the *N'West Iowa Review* was designed to cater to the region's ravenous appetite for local sports coverage. At first, the newspaper came out on Sundays, but after objections from the intensely conservative religious community, the paper began coming out Saturday morning — just in time to bring readers the latest high school football and basketball news.

“When the paper was starting out, the idea was that if we came out with Friday night sports on Saturday morning, we were immediately going to build a big audience in a lot of communities,” said Larry Keltto, managing editor. “That’s what gave it its jump start. And we’re still the only ones doing it.”

That’s a theory that could only be effective far away from any coverage offered by a major daily like *The Des Moines Register*, admitted staffers, but *The Register* has little to offer readers in northwest Iowa.

“We don’t get yesterday’s news in *The Register*, we get the day before yesterday’s news,” said Keltto. “For an area that loves its sports, people just love *The Review*, they just love it.”

Recognizing that marketing truth, and other marketing truths about the region and the community was the strength of publisher Peter Wagner. Wagner moved to Sibley and Sheldon in the early '60s to broadcast news and sell ads for radio KIWA. But it wasn't long before he was selling advertising for his own business.

“Some businessmen up there came to me and said, ‘We need a shopper, the one we have went bankrupt,’ ” recalled Wagner. “I was only 21 years old and not smart enough to realize that if a business went bankrupt there was a reason for it.”

And so, using the money from a loan on his Ford Falcon, Wagner purchased a small, sheet-fed press, and started publishing *The Golden Shopper* in 1962. It was 10

years before Wagner realized that owning his own business, operating his own successful shopper, was not going to be enough.

"Things were going smoothly and life was nice," he recalled. "So we decided, 'Gee, why not go crazy again?' " And he and his wife, Connie, launched *The N'West Iowa Review*.

"Our idea was to be a regional newspaper serving the four counties," Wagner explained. "There's no daily in this market, the closest thing to a daily would be Worthington (Minnesota) and you can't cross a state line and do an adequate job. Sioux Falls (South Dakota) has the same problem. Sioux City has Iowa news, but we're far enough away that a lot of people don't care. Spencer has a minimum-circulation daily. So the four counties stayed wide open and we thought we'd try a regional weekly and come out once a week and do the things that dailies do on a regional basis."

While he saw a market for a newspaper in the region, Wagner also saw a way to meet his own needs. "I didn't want to go through my whole life being a third-class citizen and publishing a shopper," Wagner admitted. "I wanted a newspaper; I wanted a soapbox."

The Review became Wagner's soapbox for both advertising and news. On the news side, he has promoted a regional feeling, staying away from the traditional community news and looking more at general trends.

"We try to take a look at the big picture a lot," said Jay Wagner. "We do a lot of big picture stories, try to identify different aspects of life in northwest Iowa."

"Our idea from the very beginning was that we didn't care about fender benders," he said. "They didn't make any difference. But if there's a problem with water in Sibley, Iowa, there's a good chance that same problem is going to crop up in Sioux Center. Let's give this four-county area a spokesman that shares that information back and forth."

The farm crisis of the 1980s, which hit hard in the ag-supported region of northwest Iowa, was a testing ground for that concept, said Jay Wagner. "It was kind of a

coming-of-age time for *The Review*," he recalled. "At the time, we decided we wanted to be a strong voice for the northwest Iowa area and set an agenda for the region. We were writing about solutions to problems different towns had found successful."

The farm crisis also brought a new challenge to *The Review*. A partner newspaper. In 1987 the Wagners' Iowa Information Publication, the family-owned corporation that publishes *The Review*, purchased *The Mail-Sun*, a weekly Sheldon community newspaper that was the antithesis of everything at *The Review*. Founded on Jan. 1, 1873, "*The Mail-Sun* was an award winner like *The Review* is today," said Peter Wagner.

The Mail-Sun had changed hands a number of times, most recently in 1987. The paper also sold six months after Wagner started *The Review*, although he denied that he ever wanted to be in competition with the older paper. "In retrospect," he admitted, "we were. There are only so many ad dollars in a town."

Nonetheless, the new owners operated the paper until 1987, when they sold it to Wagner. Now, *The Review* and *The Mail-Sun* are housed in the same building and the same staff puts out both papers. The purchase has given *The Review* a new acceptance in the community, said Wagner.

"We probably have five times as many people walk in the door at this location," said Wagner. "The paper has been here for, I think, ever. People came in here. It didn't matter how good *The Review* was, force of habit took them to the old newspaper office."

And it doesn't matter how good *The Mail-Sun* is, to Wagner, it isn't quite *The Review*.

"I feel very special toward *The Review*," he admitted. "I think you could get me to close down *The Mail-Sun* or *The Golden Shopper* before you could ever get me to close *The Review*. I would not say it's equal to my children, but . . . I birthed it."

But while Wagner himself was the driving force behind the paper, he said his family shares much of his devotion.

"I think Jay (now at *The Des Moines Register*) would come back here in a moment's notice if he thought that was the only way *The Review* would stay in business," he said. "*The Review* to us is very special. It's more than a newspaper. It's an accumulation of everything that we've done with our lives."

The newspaper: Staff and structure

The N'West Iowa Review was truly a family newspaper. In addition to serving as publisher, founder Peter Wagner also headed the advertising sales department. His wife, Connie, ran the creative or composing area while son Jeff was in charge of circulation and business operations. Jeff's wife, Myrna, directed many of the extra projects that the newspaper took on. A second son, Jay, served as managing editor but became a writer for *The Des Moines Register*. Following in his footsteps was not easy, said successor Larry Keltto.

"I think it would have been really difficult if this had been my first position," said Keltto, who had been managing editor at the Spirit Lake newspapers when they were owned by Iowa Information. "You make most of your big mistakes in your first year. I was able to gain confidence at Spirit Lake."

And Keltto said bringing in non-family members such as himself gave the family additional perspective on the newspaper. "I think they really welcome having someone who's not bringing all that baggage to work every day. I think it's really healthy and it's helpful to have people who don't have to eat Thanksgiving and Christmas dinners together."

But the family-owned aspect was important to the quality of the newspaper, argued family members. First, family members, they said, were more willing to work extra hours when needed. And when other staffers saw the family putting in the hours, they were more willing to do the same.

"If I were just the publisher of this paper and didn't have the feeling of affection because I birthed it, and the involvement because I'm the owner, this paper would be like

anybody else's paper," said Peter Wagner. He recounted the story of the year the newspaper put out a special section on the farm crisis. Jay, his son and the managing editor, and another reporter had the flu. The two alternated working and throwing up for days to write the section. "Jay did it because he's family," Wagner said. "And Steve did it because Jay was his buddy. One of the reasons people do it is they know I did it, did it for a long time. And they know that if they need me, I'll stay and do it again."

The family also helped the quality of the paper by turning profits back into the newspaper, said Jay Wagner. "I get a kick out of going to the Iowa Newspaper Association convention and hearing people say, 'They (*The N'West Iowa Review*) have a lot bigger newsroom.' Well, that comes right out of mom and dad's pocket. It's not like they get people to work for free."

The paper keeps five professional journalists on staff in the newsroom, as many as *The Record-Herald and Indianola Tribune*, although the Indianola paper has twice the circulation. In 1993, the staff was composed of Keltto, the managing editor; Jeff Grant, who covered education and general assignment material; Andrew Daughton, who covered county government and general assignment; Rex Troute, the sports editor; and Duane Tinkey, the photographer.

More important than the number of staffers, said Keltto, was the quality. After capturing seven newspaper-of-the-year awards and hundreds of other honors, finding quality journalists was not a problem.

Jeff Grant, who had been with the paper for three years, said the biggest problem in convincing him to leave his job at the *DeWitt Observer* was convincing him that he was good enough to work at *The Review*.

"There's a lot of pressure involved," said Grant. "Sometimes I wonder if I'm good enough to be here, and I look at the other people we have here and I wonder if I belong in this company. I'm honored that they let me work here."

Reputation was an important weapon in the battle to attract good staff members, said Jay Wagner. *The Review* uses that to help overcome what, to some young reporters, was a less than ideal location.

"People get frustrated by small towns," admitted Jay Wagner. "One of the first things I told people was, 'You're not going to see first-run movies here and the nearest McDonald's is 30 miles away.' I try to challenge people to be open-minded enough and don't try to paint a rosy picture."

Jay Wagner said many staffers were sold by the promise of the opportunity to write columns, take pictures or devote time and space to in-depth work. "It's kind of like the army," he said he told potential staffers. "You're going to hate it while you're here, but you'll talk about it as some of the best times of your life."

The staff does carry one burden not given to most community newspaper employees — a second newspaper.

In addition to the weekly *Review*, staff members also write and lay out the weekly *Mail-Sun*, the Sheldon weekly. The two papers are different in feel and in appearance. While *The Review* is a frequent award-winner, *The Mail-Sun* languishes in the shadow of its more trendy competitor. For the first 10 years of *The Review*'s life, the two papers were competitors. When Iowa Information first purchased *The Mail-Sun*, staffers were not happy to be asked to work on it.

"The staff members who had competed against *The Mail-Sun* hated it, remembered things it had done that *The Review* would never do," recalled Keltto. "If you had a good story, you'd try to protect it so it would get into *The Review*."

That has changed, but not entirely. Reporters still say if they have a good photo they will save it for *The Review*, and stories for *The Review* get more time and attention in general than stories for *The Mail-Sun*. Despite the overlap in staffs, Peter Wagner and the newsroom staffers say the two papers have different identities.

"We can do a lot more of the schmaltzy hometown stuff (in *The Mail-Sun*)," said Peter Wagner. "We don't do who had tea with who or the kind of thing that a lot of hometown papers do, but we do carry a lot of pictures, a lot of special features out of the schools."

One thing they never did was cannibalize their sports coverage. While there were some Sheldon sports in *The Mail-Sun*, the bulk of the stories still appeared in *The Review*. Wagner said the dual-paper arrangement allows him to protect his market by meeting everyone's needs: the need in Sheldon for a community weekly, and the need in northwest Iowa for a regional newspaper.

The setup took some time to become comfortable within the newsroom, said Keltto. "We had a lot of meetings about what is a *Mail-Sun* story, what is a *Review* story? Now we know."

While stories about specific happenings in Sheldon, such as city council meetings or school board coverage, appeared in *The Mail-Sun*, those stories often served as a jumping off point for more in-depth enterprise stories that applied to communities throughout the region. Those stories appeared in *The Review*.

Stories came from a variety of sources. Keltto developed many from news releases and mail sent to the newspaper. While the paper did not run traditional news releases, it did feature several special events in the more than 20 communities within its coverage area. "Staffs vary, but this staff's biggest weakness is coming up with story ideas," said Keltto. That's where he put a lot of his time and energy. Keltto also started an in-office competition for story ideas. Anyone in the office can be named Newshound of the Week. The weekly newshound's name is placed on a board in the newsroom in reward for good story ideas. But while many newspapers can rely on stories that they do annually, *The Review* was not tied to covering the same event or issue year after year. "When you're not locked into a community, you're not locked into doing the same thing year to year," said Keltto. "You can do a lot of picking of the ripest and shiniest fruit out there."

And there was a lot of fruit to choose from, much of it delivered right to the front door of *The Review*.

"On a fairly frequent basis, we'll get calls from people who have a concern about an issue in their small town and they want us to do a story because, 'I don't trust the SOB at our paper.' Or they haven't had their side of a story told," said Keltto. And when *The Review* agreed, the reporter's reception was often different from that usually given by small town residents to a visiting newspaper reporter.

"You're not obligated to be there, so people treat you a lot differently," said Keltto. "It's like when TV comes in to do a story, people are really excited. That's a lot of fun. It's really invigorating."

Reporters spent much of their week working on stories for both *The Mail-Sun* and *The Review*. Each produced two or three stories for *The Mail-Sun* and another four or five for *The Review*. The schedule for the two publications worked well, with deadlines established to give the week a building feeling, explained Keltto. Reporters came in on Monday and began work on stories for *The Mail-Sun*. That publication was laid out on Tuesday and mailed for Wednesday delivery. Then work began in earnest on *The Review*, which laid out Friday nights. Press deadline in Worthington, Minn., is 3 a.m. Saturday. The paper is delivered by mail on the rural routes and by carriers in the towns.

Once the newspapers were delivered, the feedback was almost immediate. *The Review* has never been tentative in its news coverage, said Jay Wagner. Even after he left, the newspaper spearheaded coverage of accusations against the Osceola County sheriff, who eventually lost his bid for re-election.

"At times," Jay Wagner said, "if we had a choice between pissing people off and not pissing people off, we went with pissing people off." The paper regularly endorses candidates for local offices and frequently writes stories about local residents that aren't always pleasant.

Knowing the subjects of their stories made the writers more careful, they said. "It's a lot easier to write a story in Des Moines than in a small town where you end up behind the mayor's wife in Hy-Vee for 20 minutes," said Jay Wagner. "Good newspapers shake that off and do it anyway."

But they must be careful, added Grant.

"It does make me a little more careful on how I write a story or approach it," he said. "Yesterday I wrote a story about a teacher who was terminated, and I know I'll see him in church on Sunday. It made it a difficult interview."

Being a good newspaper, said Jay Wagner, might be easier for a new newspaper. From the very beginning, *The Review* could decide not to run chicken-dinner news or check-passing photos, items that traditional weeklies have to slowly and carefully ease off their pages. But being new meant an additional challenge to the paper, he added. "People didn't feel an obligation to support the newspaper," he said. "There's a real sharp division among people in the community, just like people supporting a presidential candidate or a mayoral candidate. People would support *The Mail-Sun* or *The Review*."

And whatever else the newspaper was, Jay Wagner added, staffers always wanted it to be innovative. "We kind of set rules and pushed them as far as we could go," he said. "Sometimes that failed miserably, but sometimes, it makes the newspaper sparkle."

The future

Peter Wagner wanted to add to that sparkle in the future. "I don't think we've begun to see what we can do," he said in 1993. The paper stopped publishing newspapers in Spirit Lake and pulled back to Sheldon. While Wagner saw that as a failure, he also saw it as a learning experience. "We thought for a while that we were good enough to do multiple locations," he said. "But our hands-on management style doesn't work that way."

Instead of expanding publications, Wagner focused on niche marketing, creating small pieces for readers, such as a quarterly brides tab, a golden years special section and

sections on farming. In 1993, the paper went to pagination and eventually, Wagner would like to see *The Review* increase its frequency, perhaps to three times a week.

But the biggest question facing *The Review* was its leadership. Peter Wagner already was turning more responsibility over to Jeff Wagner. While Peter began a career as a newspaper consultant and continued to head the sales department, Jeff was taking over the circulation and business aspects of the paper. That helped the paper overall, said Peter Wagner.

"I was always good at finding the dollars, but terrible at hanging on to them," he said. "Jeff is much better at that."

But Jeff said his concern was not holding on to the dollars forever; it was finding someone who can do that for him. "The one thing that we face as a family corporation is that my father has always been the driving force, push, push, push, push. The role that I have been forced to take because of that is that of being the brakeman," said Jeff. "The negative side of the family business is when he retires making that transition where I have to become the pusher and someone else has to take on that responsibility."

Wagner himself hoped that Jeff would share that responsibility with brother, Jay, but said it was possible that Jay would not return to the paper. Someday, he said, *The Review* could be run by Jeff and Myrna Wagner, much as it was run by Peter and Connie Wagner from 1972. But all the Wagners said they see the paper staying in the family.

"It's just not an issue. I don't think about it," said Jeff.

The Record-Herald and Indianola Tribune

Introduction

When Mark Davitt came to *The Record-Herald and Indianola Tribune* as a photographer in 1980, the newspaper was a family-owned twice weekly, running engagements and obituaries on the front page. By the time the Warren County native left 10 years later, he had become managing editor and stories on local police scandals and teen pregnancy had replaced the engagements and obits.

The newspaper was purchased by the one of the largest media companies in the world — Gannett Corporation — in 1986. It boasted a circulation of more than 6,000 and by 1994 had captured more than 100 awards for excellence from the Iowa Newspaper Association and the National Newspaper Association, including first place for general excellence in Class III papers in Iowa in 1989.

But the awards are said to be secondary. The people at the *Record-Herald*, agreed staff members, are what makes it special. The portraits of two former publishers look down from a wall lined with more than 150 plaques and certificates earned by past staff members of the newspaper between 1984 and 1994. A photograph of a sports editor who died while at the paper in 1989 hung for years above the desk of one of his co-workers. The people at the newspaper said the attachment to each other only adds to their attachment to the newspaper and enhances the quality of the product.

“There’s a sense of ownership that people have there that is somewhat unique,” said Daryl Beall, who came to the newspaper as publisher in 1986, shortly after Gannett bought the paper, and left in 1990. “I don’t know what fostered it; it was there when I got there. There was a commitment to quality, a sense of ownership. We had some people who considered it a job, but we had people who gave a damn and made a difference.”⁷²

⁷²All comments by Daryl Beall come from a telephone interview in October, 1992.

The community

Nestled in the college community of Indianola, 12 miles south of Des Moines, the *Record-Herald* is secure in one of Iowa's most prosperous regions. Warren County, of which Indianola is the county seat, has a population of 36,033, with about 11,000 of those people living in Indianola. Residential growth is the county's strongest resource, with Norwalk, a community to the north, claiming the distinction of being the fastest growing Iowa community in the 1980s. Its population leapt from 1,745 in 1970 to 2,676 in 1980 and to 5,726 in 1990.⁷³

A state highway and a four-lane U.S. highway meet in Indianola, while U.S. Interstate 35 crosses Warren County from north to south on the western end of the county. Plans for an interstate bypass that will dip into the county and speed transportation to downtown Des Moines and to the city's eastern and western suburbs promise to make Warren County an even more attractive home for Des Moines workers seeking a rural home.

That migration is already under way, said Wally Blevins, head of the Indianola Chamber of Commerce and the Warren County Economic Development Commission.

"It's called yuppie go south," he said. An aggressive tax-abatement program and heavy advertising of Indianola means "you can physically buy more house here than you can in other areas of the Des Moines metro area. What helps more than anything is the drive time to downtown Des Moines or the western suburbs, plus the rural characteristics associated with Indianola — you're 12 miles from the city limits of Des Moines, but it's open country. If you go 17 or 18 miles from downtown in other directions, you're doing urban driving the whole distance."⁷⁴

⁷³Residents, 1990, and projected residents 2000-2010 in Iowa Counties, United States Census, Census Services, Department Sociology, Iowa State University, Feb. 1991, 18.

⁷⁴All comments by Wally Blevins come from a Nov. 12, 1992, telephone interview.

Not everyone in Indianola is certain that the community should grow, said Blevins. Even local retailers say the residential growth adds little to their businesses.

"The business community takes growth as a positive, but they recognize to some extent that there's not a tremendous amount of direct economic benefit that comes from the residential growth, except to the contractors. There is a lot of potential economic benefit," said Blevins.

Blevins said Indianola and Warren County face the challenge of getting newcomers to town to see the area as more than a bedroom community — a place where they do nothing more than sleep. One local grocery store manager noted that his customers in the early mornings and late evenings tend to be "better looking, better dressed and more affluent." They tend to be commuters, he said.

While Indianola offers residents three grocery stores, ranging from Hy-Vee to the low-cost Aldi's, there is little other major retail base in the town. A Wal-Mart draws business from surrounding communities, but Blevins doesn't fool himself. "Wal-Mart does well because people in surrounding communities stop there on their way to the mall."

Southridge Mall, 12 miles north of Indianola, draws many local consumers who stop on their way home from work. Growth, like the commuters, is headed north. A Pamida situated slightly south of Wal-Mart on U.S. Highway 65/69, the four-lane highway from Des Moines, hangs on in the face of its wildly successful competitor, but a Place's on Iowa Highway 92 on the west side of town closed its doors in the late 1980s.

There is no upscale restaurant in the community, the closest being a sports bar that doubles as Friday and Saturday night dining out and a tea room that serves lunches and does some catering. Otherwise, the dining establishments in Indianola are limited to a Chinese restaurant, two chain restaurants (Golden Corral and Country Kitchen) a couple of small cafes and several fast food restaurants. Two clothing stores, an athletic club, a Hallmark store and another card shop, and a jewelry store march alongside a photo studio, optometrist's office, hardware stores and a community coffee shop to fill the traditional

town square with businesses, but not necessarily with customers. A farm parts manufacturer and a refrigerated-truck manufacturer are the town's major industries.

Two wildly divergent attractions bring the community's summer population up by several hundred. Early in the summer since 1974, the town has hosted the Des Moines Metro Opera Company, one of the three largest regional opera festivals in the nation. The company performs three operas in repertory, bringing in around 200 staff members from all over the nation to what is becoming known as opera in the cornfields. The opera company draws its audiences from the metro area, but also from around the state of Iowa and around the nation. At least one group of opera lovers makes the trek overseas from England every year to enjoy the season, performed entirely in English.

Later in the summer, the town welcomes about 100 hot air balloonists who compete in the National Balloon Classic. For almost 20 years, the town was home to the National Hot Air Balloon Championship, but that event began wandering the nation in the 1980s. The Classic, a gondola-shaped balloon museum and crowds of spectators who continue to enjoy the colorful sport are testimony to the success of that earlier event.

Like the opera, the Classic originally found its home at Simpson College. One of the leading Methodist institutions in the state, the college is one of Indianola's top employers, and an attraction for many Des Moines employees who live in Indianola to enjoy the cultural activities offered by the college. A number of local residents found their way to Indianola to attend college and stayed to live out their lives. Many older alumni make their homes at The Village, a residential retirement community also with ties to the Methodist church. Less than five years old, The Village has drawn many long-time residents back to their home town, while attracting retirees from around the state who either attended school in Indianola or who have children or grandchildren now making their homes in the county.

There is little retail business or industry offered in Warren County outside of Indianola. Blevins described Warren County as slightly schizophrenic. "The southern half

of the county has more in common with Clarke County and Osceola, with kind of an agricultural impoverishment," he said. "You get into northern Warren County, you get into better farmland, but it's within the influence sphere of metro Des Moines."

Blevins said he sees the communities of Warren County reaching out for more business and growth. A rash of economic development groups has sprung up in the small towns surrounding Indianola, and all the communities in the northern part of the county are experiencing some residential growth. Convincing those residents to call Warren County truly home is the next challenge, said Blevins.

"With a stronger loyalty and a stronger sense of community, we can ultimately generate more business," he said. "We're blessed by proximity to Des Moines, but we're also cursed by proximity to Des Moines."

The newspaper: Its history and position

The *Record-Herald* started as a weekly called *The Weekly Iowa Visitor*. In 1874, it became *The Indianola Herald*. Over the years, it competed for readers and advertisers with *The Tribune* and *The Record*. In 1920, the three combined to become a twice-weekly newspaper published under its current name. Until 1970, it was published on Tuesday with Democratic editorials and on Thursday with Republican editorials. In February of 1982 the owner of the paper, Lewis Kimer, sold the weekly publication to *The Des Moines Register*. In 1985, Gannett acquired *The Register* and its subsidiaries, including *The Record-Herald*. Shortly thereafter, the paper went from twice a week to once a week, appearing in mailboxes on Wednesdays and dropping delivery by carriers.⁷⁵

Beall came to the newspaper soon after its purchase by Gannett, at a time when the newspaper was beginning to triumph editorially, while still failing to turn a profit.

⁷⁵Maxine Kimer, "*The Record-Herald and Indianola Tribune*," History of Warren County, Iowa, 1987, 103-105.

That was one area changed by Gannett, known for bottom-line concerns. "There was no question that Gannett expected to produce a profit at all their locations," he said. "That was a major change. In terms of producing a good, quality news product and staff development and commitment to the community, I didn't see a change, certainly not one for the worse."

Gannett brought profit to the newspaper, first by tightening the purse strings. But *The Register* also began to capitalize on the RHT's circulation, offering price incentives to national advertisers and classified ad customers who place their ads in both the Des Moines paper and the two *Register*-owned weeklies in the state, *Indianola* and the *Independence Bulletin-Journal*.

Beall said that concern for income profited the news department, as well as the corporate coffers. "The newspaper already had a reputation as being a better journalistic product," he said. "By making it also a profitable product you could devote more resources to making it better."

The Record-Herald did that, said Beall, without demanding that the newsroom sacrifice integrity for dollars.

"In many weeklies and in a lot of dailies, the newsroom is kind of the marketing effort," he said. "The tradition at the RHT of allowing and encouraging an independent newsroom certainly contributed to the journalistic product."

The newspaper, Beall added, was one that commanded the respect of the people it served. "The newspaper has a very pervasive influence in the community, a role to play," he said. "I think it's respected."

That assessment is borne out in the newspaper's reception by its community. With 13,600 households in Warren County, the RHT enjoys strong market penetration, reaching more than 6,000 homes weekly.⁷⁶

⁷⁶Demographics, sales package, *The Record-Herald and Indianola Tribune*, 1991.

The community did more than receive the newspaper; it also participated in the newspaper. The newspaper regularly featured two full pages of opinion, including three to five letters to the editor each week, and running a column written by a different community member each week.

Community members also put their news into the This Week section, which includes community news offered by several local columnists, as well as columns by local teachers and two former educators.

Local government paid attention to the newspaper. When publisher Tom Hawley first came to the paper in 1991, he was surprised to see government officials include news deadlines as a part of their scheduling discussions. An editorial recommending a combined county sheriff and local police chief's position resulted in council consideration of the proposal. When school officials planned a bond issue, supporters were adamant that the issue had to have the newspaper's support to have any chance of success, although it failed even with the newspaper's support.

Intense and independent coverage of governmental bodies was a hallmark of the newspaper, and the reporters said it was one reason for its success, both as a quality journalistic product and in the hearts and minds of readers.

"My husband says the best thing about this newspaper is that we're not afraid to threaten to sue people. He's so proud of that," said one reporter. "I've never known us to back off something because the mayor doesn't want the story done or the superintendent doesn't want the story done. People in town know it and expect it anymore. Sometimes different people don't like it, but the readership pretty much knows it and expects it."⁷⁷

The paper has retained that independence, despite its ties to what some local residents call *The Register's* liberal agenda.

⁷⁷Comments from *Record-Herald* staff members were made during personal interviews in October 1992. Staff members were interviewed outside of the workday and place to minimize their working relationship with the author of the thesis.

While the paper has fairly strong ties to *The Register* in its advertising and business departments, its editorial operations are independent of the parent publication.

That is one of the things that draw reporters, said the two full-time reporters at the paper. Deb Belt, who began working for the newspaper in 1989, came from the Oskaloosa *Herald* while Shawn Plank, who joined the staff in 1991, came from the Muscatine *Journal*. Both said Gannett carries little weight in their thinking about their everyday jobs.

"I thought at the beginning that I could notice it (Gannett) because the paper's so much larger," said Plank. "I thought it was *The Register* owning us and Gannett controlling that as to why it's so big. I see that effect. I don't see any effect where Geneva (Overholser, *Register* editor) calls me up and says, 'I want you to run a story this way.' "

Belt said Gannett's impact tends to be seen in its management practices. Managers at Gannett are trained in management by objective, a yearly goal-setting process.

"The whole management of the company is a lot more progressive than the last place I worked too, and that makes a big difference as a woman," she said.

Gannett's dedication to hiring and promoting women was evident in the newspaper's staff, which boasted 69-percent female staff. Four of its six top managers were women. Its first publisher under Gannett, hired initially by *The Register*, was a woman.

The newspaper: Its staff and structure

The newsroom was generally divided between news and typesetting, both administered by the managing editor, who reported to the editor-publisher. Under the managing editor were two full-time news reporters, a full-time photographer and a full-time sports editor. The sports editor also had a part-time assistant. In the typesetting area, there were two full-time typesetters and a full-time proofreader. While the typesetters served largely as news assistants, with one serving as home life editor and the other handling basic editing of copy, the proofreader did exactly what the title says. Responsibilities included reading all the news stories, legal insertions and advertisements that appear in the

newspaper. At least one local reader was so devoted to the product that after retiring from teaching school he began volunteering at the newspaper to help in the proofreading task.

The paper ran about 50 pages per week in four sections, with 12 pages of classified advertising; 6 pages of sports; 1 to 3 pages of travel news provided through wire services and supported by national advertising from *The Register*; a 12-page This Week section, featuring the traditional community news of weddings, community dinners, anniversaries and church news; and a 12-page A section that includes "hard news" such as education, agriculture, police news and opinion submissions. The front three pages of the newspaper were entirely staff written, with only occasional news releases breaking the number of bylines. The paper strived to have by-lined stories on the education and agriculture pages each week, but that goal was rarely met.

Frequently, a locally taken photograph appeared with a collection of news releases and local news such as college news and businesses changes and announcements. Most of the inside content was local, although the staff used to include a number of features by news interns at the Iowa Newspaper Association's news service. That operation shut down in the fall of 1992 and the paper has had a hard time filling the void. A number of stories done as class projects by journalism students at Drake University in Des Moines help fill special sections and an increased number of local columns and more and larger photos also were filling space.

The paper ran about 75-percent advertising, while a thick collection of inserts gives readers a heavy packet in their mailboxes each week and helped finance the independent news staff.

The weekly content of the paper was developed from the ideas thrown out at Tuesday afternoon story meetings. The entire department discussed possible stories, editorials, photographs and graphics for the next week's paper. Many of the ideas were developed by reporters who covered a beat, but often a typesetter or sports writer came up

with a news story. There was little that was dictatorial about the weekly story meetings, said the reporters.

"I wouldn't like to have an editor who said, 'Here are your stories for this week,' " said one. "This is sort of a dual process, but not really. I'm generating stories, other people are generating ideas, the managing editor has ideas, the publisher has ideas. They all come together at the meetings and lose their identity tag. Nobody knows where they came from when we get done."

Once the stories were assigned, the staff got to work, with reporters pulling together stories and photos, while the typesetting staff prepared the community news and other news releases for the paper. While these articles received some editing by professional news staffers, in general typesetters were responsible for editing the community news and putting it into news style themselves. They lived up to the expectation, studying the Associated Press Stylebook and emulating the trained reporters at the newspaper. On Monday, the reporting staff put its news hat away and turned to the computers to lay out the paper. By Tuesday afternoon, the cycle was complete as the paper was put to bed.

This process left out the 26 special sections, the paper had planned for the 1993 fiscal year. One thing reporters and other staff members were keenly aware of was the money that flowed through the building. While they would have liked to see more money stay in the newsroom, they said they were proud of the financial success of the publication.

"It signifies that readers and advertisers like the product," said one reporter. "You must be on the right track."

The staff was keenly aware, also, of the track that the newspaper sat on. Since 1991, the 12 members of the news department gathered once a year to talk about their goals for the next year. The annual meeting was part of the management-by-objective process in which all managers participated, but lower-level staff members said they were beginning to

see a connection between the management's MBOs, the things they find in their own annual performance reviews, and the things they see in the newspaper.

"It gives everyone a clear sense of where the ship is sailing," said one reporter. "It's the whole works. We only see the news part, but the managing editor sees everything. At those meetings, everyone knows where we're going. A lot of the ideas for changes, also, come from the grass roots. Come from typesetters and reporters, everyone. And a lot of those things have been implemented now."

The goals established during those meetings later appeared in goals set during yearly performance reviews. All staff members at the RHT received annual performance reviews, with salary reviews. The reviews were held on the anniversary of the date of hire and gave employee and manager a chance to discuss not only strengths and weaknesses, but also the future. The reporters said the process was valuable.

"It seems like performance reviews mean something here," said one reporter. "At my old job, my editor would give me a list of three things I needed to improve on, none of which were applicable to improving me or the newspaper. Here, a lot of thought goes into them. A lot of things that not only improve the person and improve the manager, but improve the newspaper, which is the bottom line."

The future

The newspaper still was trying to improve, although not all the upcoming changes were to appear in the publication. The paper was shortly to move its news and layout departments into a new building. It added Macintosh computers and a fourth press unit in the last five years, and staff members hoped to see more computers and a wider variety of use of the computers throughout the building. Consideration was being given to creating a design coordinator position and pages the staff considered weak, such as a weekly travel page, were being redesigned and strengthened.

The bottom line at the RHT, said staff members, was the intangible attachment of staff to the newspaper. "People here really care about the final product," said one reporter.

"They care so much about it, they want to make sure it comes out right even when they're not here. The paper reflects us. It's part of us."

The West Branch Times

"It's that big shoes thing," Debbie Owens wrote in the first edition of *The West Branch Times* published by her and her husband, Mike, in October of 1993. The couple had just purchased the newspaper from David Johnson, who left them "staring down a trail of footprints 148 awards long. . . . They become, in my blacker moments, shoes come to life in a madcap little dance, taunting me."⁷⁸

They would taunt anyone.

When David Johnson took over *The West Branch Times* in 1983 it featured group photos, weddings and engagements on the front page. A one-year subscription to the newspaper cost \$6 and the community's downtown had dwindled to 10 occupied storefronts, with another 15 or so standing empty.⁷⁹

By 1993, however, things had changed. The downtown area was almost full, with 24 of 25 storefronts occupied. Subscriptions to the newspaper cost \$22 a year and the front page was more likely to carry a story on a lesbian teacher being chased from town than society news. And 148 awards hung on the walls of the editorial rooms, hidden in the back of a consignment shop in downtown West Branch.

Community residents were more than willing to give David Johnson credit for many of those changes — even those outside the newspaper.

Not only has David given West Branch a newspaper to be proud of, he has shared his vision with us. His focus on the revitalization of downtown West Branch stands out as one of his most significant contributions to this community. While many people are to be commended for the transformation, David's perseverance made it happen.⁸⁰

But, once again, the newspaper had been sold. And those shoes danced on.

⁷⁸Debbie Owens, "Stepping into really big shoes," *The West Branch Times*, Oct. 7, 1993.

⁷⁹Interview by author with David Johnson, Oct. 7, 1993.

⁸⁰Hanlin, Bonnie, "Reflection of a town's vitality," *The West Branch Times*, Sept. 30, 1993, 2A.

"As you can plainly see, it's hanging over my head," said Debbie Owens. "I feel the weight of it every single breathing moment of my day, but that's part of what we like about it."⁸¹

The quality of the newspaper stemmed in part from the community, said Mike and Debbie Owens.

"In West Branch things are happening," she said. "You go to some of these little sleepy towns and maybe there isn't quite so much happening. Here's there's stuff going on."

And the community was used to having it covered. That was the first step for Mike and Debbie Owens. It would be harder to start a paper and offer good journalism than it was to come into a town where good journalism already existed, said Mike.

The community

And not only did good journalism already exist in West Branch, the town also had news that needed covering.

Sprawling across Interstate 80 in eastern Iowa, just a few miles from Iowa City, West Branch is the only community housing both one of the state's best weekly newspapers and a bona fide tourist site. The Hoover Presidential Library and Museum, erected in honor of President Herbert Hoover, the only Iowa-born president, and the national park where the library and museum rest, drew thousands of visitors to the town each year, and gave the community a strong sense of history.

It was a history that was carried throughout the town. Antique stores were the backbone of the downtown district, and 15 of the downtown's 25 buildings were listed on the National Register of Historic Places. But the Hoover library and museum, even while they drew almost 100,000 people each year, had been a source of contention in the community since the 1960s and the great "land grab" for the sites.

⁸¹Interview with Debbie Owens, Oct. 7, 1993.

David Johnson, editor and former owner of the newspaper, said the historical sites are a good thing. "I don't think there would be a business community downtown without it," he said. "That was already indicated in 1983, when we got this close to having a vacant downtown. I really think, without it, this mixture of small shops and restaurants and things like that wouldn't be here, because why would people come here anyway?"

Part of the debate, said West Branch Mayor Richard Rex, centered on how much business the historical sites draw to the actual community. Almost 20,000 cars a day zip by West Branch on the interstate bisecting the residential and historical districts of the community from the industrial area. About 100,000 people a year stop to visit the Hoover Library and Museum. A much smaller number work their way over the bridge crossing the Wapsinonoc Creek and into town. It is a problem both Rex and Johnson acknowledged.

"The problem, if there is a problem, is that the National Park Service that the park is a part of, is adjacent to the interstate," said Rex. "The first thing you see is the national park, the library, the birthplace, the blacksmith shop. So you see that before getting into the community itself. A lot of times people will go to the park and get back on the interstate and they're gone. A lot of people in our community don't see the draw."

But Rex said the town's antique stores and unique restaurants draw a different kind of visitor.

"We're trying to cater to two different types of visitors to the town," he said. Those who stay for a while to prowl through the antique stores and maybe have a steak dinner, and those who take in the museum and hit the road. But gaining the visitors has cost the town, admitted Rex. "We've had a transition from community-support businesses to specialty shops that cater to visitors to the community," he said. "We've lost the clothing stores, the hardware stores, and we have antique shops, restaurants and a couple of other specialty types, like wildlife print shops and used furniture. Things people will drive out to shop for."

That hurt the newspaper, as well as the town, said Johnson.

"When you've got antique stores, and an art gallery and a photo studio and you're doing restaurants that are really catering in many cases to the tourist trade, for the newspaper that's real bad news," he said. "The advertising market in this town is in Iowa City."

Rex agreed. "The problem in a small community is being able to make ends meet," he said. "The advertising dollars are the ones that make it work, and when you have a business community that doesn't do a lot of advertising it makes it hard. You have to go outside the community for advertising to make it work."

That works in West Branch because the community includes a number of commuters — university staff and downtown employees who drive the nine miles from West Branch to Iowa City each day.

"This community is very interactive with Iowa City," said Mike Owens, one of the new owners of the paper. "People shop there, people work there. So there's advertising to be had over there." Owens said that under him and his wife, the paper also will look to other small communities around West Branch for advertising, including Tipton and West Liberty.

"You have to be very sensitive about those things, though," warned Debbie Owens. "If we do get it, we get it from things we don't have. We want to be sure that we go first to the people who live here."

Despite its connections to other communities, West Branch can be very insular, added Johnson.

"People would come to me and express an opinion and I would say, 'Well, attend a council meeting or a school board meeting or write a letter to the editor,'" Johnson recalled. "But so many of them would say, 'I haven't been here long enough.'"

Some of those people were in town for 15 years or more, he added. "I just said to them, 'As soon as you move into a community, you're a part of the community and you

don't have to wait around for any amount of time to take part in the democratic process, to take part in the community.' I don't buy that."

While the town has not had huge residential growth, it was growing, said Johnson. What worried him was how it was growing.

"There's a real lack of rental housing here, a real lack of however you want to define affordable housing," he said. "There might as well be a sign posted outside of town that said, 'If you make over \$80,000 a year and plan to build a house worth more than \$100,000, then welcome. The rest of you can just stop right here and go back to wherever you came from.' "

Many local residents end up living in mobile homes, said Johnson. One out of every five homes in West Branch is a mobile home, he said.

"They run a great mobile-home park," he said. "It's well-kept, but the last I knew about 450 people were living there out of a population of 1,900. Something approaching 150 students in our school district live there, out of a district that's approaching 800."

One of the problems stifling growth in the community in the 1980s was that the town was nearly landlocked by farmland, said Rex. But a local farmer then sold to a developer and since then 10 to 12 houses have been built a year. Industry in town also began growing, attracting more residents. Purathan, which makes foam door handles and car furniture is a major employer, as are a Cargill plant and the Tidewater printing company. But Johnson said he would like to see more residential growth, although he was not sure how to go about developing it.

"One problem is we're so close to Iowa City, where the real-estate values are the highest in the state," he said. "If land is expensive in Iowa City, it's going to be a little cheaper here, but it's still going to be expensive.

"There's a heck of a lot of building going on in Iowa City and some of that should be here," he added. "But I don't think the community has been as aggressive as some

communities in getting that, but I don't know that you should sell out the community just to get more houses built. That's a real tough call."

History and position of the newspaper

Just as it has during all the earlier tough calls, *The West Branch Times* will likely be a part of finding a solution to this problem, said townspeople. It was Johnson and *The Times* that contributed to getting the historic preservation through. It was Johnson and *The Times* that exposed the community's involvement in the Iowa Trust scandal, in which the city invested funds with the Iowa Trust company, that were later embezzled.

The newspaper has a long history. Founded in 1875, it always has been independently owned. "The newspaper has always been a real cornerstone of the community," Johnson said.

The first recorded newspaper in West Branch was *The West Branch Index*, launched in 1869. The newspaper was published "occasionally" and in 1870 was sold. The new owners kept it afloat for about a year.

It wasn't until 1875 that the first continuous newspaper began publication, with L.W. Raber starting publication April 1, 1875. He almost immediately sold the paper to Edward Grinnell.⁸²

The newspaper changed hands several times, finally being sold to Jack and Maxine Maher in 1959. The Mahers kept it "23 years, 238 days."⁸³

In 1977, Johnson decided to buy the newspaper from them.

His father, Donald, formerly of West Branch, first suggested that Johnson consider buying the newspaper. "I decided that it would be a good thing to do," Johnson recalled. "I had worked off and on for six years at the *Washington Post* and knew people there who

⁸²"The Press," The History of Cedar County to 1878, Western Historical Co., 456.

⁸³Jack Maher. "Breezes thru the Branches," *The West Branch Times*, April 27, 1983, 2.

would say, 'Some day, I'm going to go get out from under (publisher) Katherine Graham and I'm going to go and buy my own newspaper.' Well, here I had a chance to do it."

The chance, yes. But the reality was almost six years away.

During one stint at *The Post*, he learned that the National Science Foundation took reporters to Antarctica each year to write about the scientific studies going on there. "The one story that caught my attention were the people who were hired to do the logistics for the science projects," Johnson recalled. "I thought it was just a bunch of scientists who waddled down there, did their research and came back. But there's actually a whole support team of privately hired people."

And through persistence, Johnson became one of those people.

Shortly after his return from the first trip he decided to buy the newspaper. While Maher agreed to the sale, he didn't want to step down. Each year, he asked Johnson for "just one more year."

Johnson made two more polar expeditions before deciding to finally move on the newspaper. "I got up one day and realized that I was 32 years old and I had been waiting around for six years," he said. "I had been traveling a lot and I just wanted to plant myself somewhere. And what better place to do that than the town where you grew up? And what better thing to be doing than running the newspaper?"

So Johnson gave Maher an ultimatum. A few months later, he owned the newspaper. And after living almost his entire life in the community, Johnson found it easy to be accepted and easy to make changes.

"I already had a reputation," said Johnson. "I knew the paper was going to be different. But people here who knew me growing up until I was a teenager and went off to college, knew me as different too. I had a reputation as being somebody who wanted to do things different from everybody else. I could do some different things, and it would almost be in character."

He started doing different things immediately.

On April 27, 1983, the newspaper featured a front page full of photographs. It had a photo of local students who received awards from the Lions' Club and another photo of two businessmen who received an award for donations to a public-service organization.

The next week, May 4, 1983, the paper had a new owner, new masthead, an editorial page on Page 2 and photographs of people doing things other than looking at the camera. Johnson redesigned the paper a second time during his 10-year ownership, and in 1985, his work paid off. The newspaper received the Best Front Page, Best Overall Design and General Excellence awards from the Iowa Newspaper Association. The awards summed up what the newspaper was trying to accomplish, said Johnson.

Each week we try to create a good looking front page which will encourage people to pick up the paper. Each week we try to design the paper from front to back so that it is easy to read, in terms of both news and advertising content. But the General Excellence Award has the most meaning for us. After all, it represents our purpose for being here — West Branch is a good community, and we want to provide its people with a good newspaper.⁸⁴

But it wasn't just the INA judges who found Johnson's product excellent — it was also the community. "You undoubtedly are aware the competition is tough in the publishing field," wrote one reader. "You and your staff had to earn that award the 'old-fashioned' way — you had to work for it."⁸⁵

And the staff kept on working, until Johnson sold the paper in 1993, and 148 awards began to haunt the dreams of Mike and Debbie Owens.

Staff and structure

The staff of *The West Branch Times* has been fairly easy to list. David Johnson, editor. His alter ego, Vid Johnson, photographer.

⁸⁴David Johnson and Denise Grimsman, "A letter of appreciation from the editors," *The West Branch Times*, April 18, 1985, 2.

⁸⁵Lloyd Cashman, "Winning an award 'the old-fashioned way'," *The West Branch Times*, April 18, 1985, 2.

I was knocked over by the photography. I recall inquiring, "are David Johnson and Vid Johnson brothers?" I later discovered David "Vid" Johnson had enough energy and talent for two people.⁸⁶

The staff of the newspaper after the sale will not change much. Mike Owens will handle the news end of the paper, while his wife, Debbie, takes on the business. "Probably we'll discuss all those things," Mike added. "I'll show it to Deb, 'what do you think?' That sort of thing. It's just a question of giving each person a bit of a focus."

Under Johnson, the focus was on the editorial department. That sometimes hurt the paper, he said.

"I was spending so much on the news side, taking pictures and so forth that I never did really develop an advertising department," said Johnson. "If I had it to do over again, I would have just created a position and turned it over to somebody."

As it was, there were few people to turn it over to. Johnson generally worked with at least one, sometimes two assistant editors, who handled everything from stories to typesetting to advertising layout. The Owenses say they don't know how big their staff will be, although they planned to keep Johnson's assistant editors on for a while.

"The people who have been here are really the glue that holds the place together, especially while we're trying to find our way," said Mike Owens. "There're just little things. Every time you do something, you have to stop and learn something about it. Everything takes longer now."

"Like on the little things that I'm not used to covering. . . . I mean at Associated Press we didn't do too much on the Order of the Eastern Star. Things like that I really have to talk to people or look at past editions and see how it was done in the past. It's tricky. That part of it didn't even occur to me."

⁸⁶Hanlin, Bonnie B., "Reflection of town's vitality." *The West Branch Times*, Sept. 30, 1993, 2.

But both of the Owenses said they did not want to change things unnecessarily. "I don't want to come in here and just upset the apple cart," Mike Owens said. "It's something where we're trying to find out what people expect to be in the paper and make sure they still get that, and then any changes we make are going to be gradual."

Before they can make changes, both Mike and Debbie said they had to get more used to the schedule.

"There hasn't been a real system to it so far," Mike Owens said after his first week at the paper. "It's been a lot more spontaneous in the early going than maybe I'd like, but maybe that's just the way the circumstances have ruled. You go to news at one point, and you just kind of stumble into things. The day kind of takes you right through it without a great deal of planning. A couple of little things on your calendar so you know you'll be at one or two things, but other than that you do things as you can get to them."

After everything was covered, the newspaper was laid out, with type produced on old-fashioned Compugraphic machines. The paper was printed in Muscatine first thing Wednesday. Inserts were stuffed there before the newspaper was returned to West Branch, where it was mailed Wednesday afternoon from a post office about a block away from the newspaper office. At the same time it went into counter sales at a number of local shops, including Benjamin's Apothecary, the Jack and Jill grocery store and the Casey's convenience store.

Under Johnson, there was no need for story meetings or long-term planning. He covered the stories he had time to cover. Some choices were easy: West Branch high school sports, the Iowa Trust scandal, debates over historical restoration. But when he missed a story, there was no one to blame but himself.

"I just kick myself when I didn't really write what I consider to be a good story, or I didn't shoot a photograph the way I wanted to, or I just didn't have time to do things," Johnson said. "I miss that, I miss having an editor because I have to be the editor. I would like to be working with someone where you can have that benefit."

The need for an editor or to work with others could have played into Johnson's reasons for leaving the paper, he admitted. For most of his years at *The Times* he got that camaraderie from yearly newspaper conventions and from his readers.

"When I hear other people talk about sitting down with their staffs, because they really have staffs, I miss that," he said. "But what kind of happens, [is] almost the readers play editors. If they tell you a story idea, they're doing that. It's just a different means to the same end."

Future

The readers will continue to play a big role in dictating the coverage in the newspaper, said Mike and Debbie Owens. "You want to have things that are important to people, of interest to people," said Mike Owens. "You want to have things that are a little bit provocative."

But he was not opposed to changes. He considered redesigning the newspaper and planned to work on photography. Meanwhile, Debbie planned to hit new advertisers.

In a few years, they said, David Johnson may not recognize the newspaper. "It's probably not the same newspaper five years from now," Debbie Owens said. "We hope that we're well thought of and we still have an active voice in the community, that we haven't become an observer. We're still out there, part of the fight."

For Johnson himself, the title he carried at *The West Branch Times* sums up his future: Managing editor. While he received several offers of positions as general manager or advertising director, he said he was not "interested in the business side anymore. . . . I'd rather fight with advertising directors than be one."

And when he looks at *The Times*, he said, "I'll maintain the same critical look at newspapers I do with all of them. I just want the newspaper to continue. I want it to be successful on a business end — and on the other end, too."

He will not be unhappy to leave that pressure behind, he admitted. "I drive myself crazy. I'm a perfectionist, but oh, what the hell? It's been fun."

CHAPTER 5

Conclusions

"It bothers me that a statement would be made in The Associated Press that all weekly papers are is church news and recipes and stuff like that," said David Johnson of *The West Branch Times*. "Most of the good newspapers in the state aren't. And there's no reason to think that. That shouldn't be what people think of as newspapers, just little bulletin boards that come in the mail. They are to provide news."⁸⁷

And that, in reverse, defines the quality weekly newspaper. The good weekly papers are more than "just bulletin boards that come in the mail." They cover news — teachers being fired, drug murders in the countryside — that is the stuff of good weekly newspapers. That definition is easy to find in the responses of editors to the survey completed as part of this thesis. Local news must be covered, it must be attractively presented, and it must be honest and accurate.

This thesis came to that not-surprising conclusion by following two paths.

First, a survey asked 100 editors of weekly newspapers in Iowa to identify the three best weekly newspapers in the state, choosing from a list of members of the Iowa Newspaper Association. Editors also were asked to select from a list of 25 statements the seven that best described the three newspapers they had chosen, and then to select from the same list of 25, the seven statements that best describe the strenghts of their own newspapers, and finally, the seven areas in which their own newspapers needed to improve.

Editors identified four newspapers as "the best." The four all scored well on similar characteristics, with editors saying they do a good job of informing readers about local issues, of using photos and graphics effectively and of including a large amount of staff-written copy vs. wire copy.

⁸⁷ Interview by author with David Johnson, Oct. 7, 1993.

Editors said the best newspapers also (in order of their ranking): reporting is clear and expert; news is honest and accurate; presentation is clean and well-organized; vital local events are covered; and diversity is encouraged.

But while the newspapers were similar in the signs of excellence that appear on their pages each week, they varied widely in their formats and in their means of achieving excellence.

Each of the top newspapers is unique. They varied in circulation from a little over 1,000 to more than 6,000; in ownership from a single proprietor to a media giant; and in staff from a fanatically devoted single reporter/ad salesman/photographer to a newspaper-wide staff of nearly 40. And each had its own way of achieving success, which was noted in visits to the four newspapers, and in conversations with their staffs, and with former employees and community members.

In Adel, the newspaper's staff members set goals for themselves, and then made sure they successfully met those goals. The staff decided to regard the categories in the Iowa Newspaper Association contests as more than contest categories. They used the framework provided by the categories — such as coverage of education and coverage of agriculture — as a framework outlining what weekly newspapers needed to do well. Publisher Burl Tiedemann put his money behind conscious effort to improve the paper by hiring an additional reporter.

In Sheldon, the paper carved out a four-county niche for itself and then covered the area with a depth and quality that other publications could not achieve. While publisher Peter admitted that daily newspapers in Worthington, Minn., and Sioux Falls, S.D., reach into northwest Iowa, he insisted that a newspaper cannot reach across state lines and do a good job. He took advantage of that perceived weakness and created his own market.

In Indianola, the newspaper built its successful editorial product on a firm financial footing. An influx of advertising from *The Des Moines Register* and renewed attention to

the bottom line provided the funding to hire strong reporters and photographers and to keep them at the paper.

And in West Branch, it was simply the manic efforts of publisher David Johnson that created a quality newspaper to cover its own small corner of the world and to do it well.

And while each of these newspapers relied on its own formula to achieve success, they also relied on talented journalists and employees to implement that formula. In Adel, publisher Burl Tiedemann gave raises above and beyond the cost of living to help keep his staff "intact and happy." That paid off, according to Beth Dalbey, managing editor.

"The attitude of the employees has a lot to do with winning newspaper of the year," she said. "If you can keep your staff intact and happy, you'll do well."

In Indianola, the staff receives both money and a sense of ownership, according to Daryl Beall, former publisher of *The Record-Herald*. "There was a commitment to quality, we had people who gave a damn and made a difference," he said.

Opportunities for further research

This survey raised a number of questions that merit further study. One, raised at the very outset of the study by members of the Iowa Newspaper Association, is to ask readers what *they* look for in a weekly newspaper. Certainly, while the four newspapers profiled in this study have achieved the recognition of their peers, it is important to find out what readers look for in their weekly newspapers, and what they think the weeklies do well.

But there are questions raised, as well, by the information uncovered in this study. One is the question of journalism education. While many of the reporters and staff members surveyed were recent college graduates, some with master's degrees in journalism, several professors of journalism in Iowa freely admitted to knowing little or nothing about weekly newspapers. A future study should look at how college journalism educators perceive weekly newspapers and what perceptions they are passing on to their students.

The four newspapers identified as excellent around the state are well-known to many newspaper editors because of their award-winning records in newspaper competitions. In some sense, while that reinforces the notion that they are excellent, it also loads the deck in their favor at the beginning of the survey. Some newspaper editors may have selected them simply because they recognized the name of the newspaper. It would be useful in a future study to ask editors from outside the state or educators inside the state to name their top choices from a narrowed list of weekly newspapers, to see whether their perceptions match those of the weekly editors surveyed in this project.

Another possible weakness identified by a respondent to this study is its focus on the editorial department of the newspaper. As one editor pointed out, the financial resources of a newspaper affect what resources are offered to the news department. It would be helpful to include a look at the financial background of newspapers if a follow-up study were to be done.

The interviews with the different newspapers also raised a line of future study. All four of the newspapers take advantage of training opportunities offered through the Iowa Newspaper Association and other groups. Is this dedication to continual training for their staffs part of the reason for the excellence of these newspapers, or do they continue training because they are good newspapers?

APPENDIX

Questionnaire for editors

Enclosed is a list of weekly newspapers in Iowa, as well as a list of statements describing newspapers. Please use those to complete this survey. Thank you.

1. Using the attached list of weekly newspapers that are members of the Iowa Newspaper Association, please list the paper you rank as the best in Iowa. Please omit your own newspaper. List your answer by number.

2. Using the attached list of weekly newspapers that are members of the Iowa Newspaper Association, please list the paper you rank as the second best in Iowa. Please omit your own newspaper. List your answer by number.

3. Using the attached list of weekly newspapers that are members of the Iowa Newspaper Association, please list the paper you rank as the third best in Iowa. Please omit your own newspaper. List your answer by number.

4. Please turn to the next page and find a set of 30 statements called Statements of Quality. Select SEVEN statements from the list provided that you think MOST describe the newspaper you called the best weekly newspaper in Iowa. Put the number of that statement next to its ranking in order of importance, starting with one, most important.

1. _____	2. _____	3. _____	4. _____
5. _____	6. _____	7. _____	

5. Read the statements again, looking for the overall strengths of *your* newspaper. Please list them here by number in order starting with one, most descriptive.

1. _____	2. _____	3. _____	4. _____
5. _____	6. _____	7. _____	

6. Finally, look at the statements again. Are there any areas that could be improved by your newspaper? List the statements below by number.

_____	_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____	

7. If there are any strengths and weaknesses not covered in the statements of quality, please discuss them here. Feel free to continue on another sheet of paper if necessary.

Questionnaire for educators

Enclosed is a list of weekly newspapers in Iowa, as well as a list of statements describing newspapers. Please use those to complete this survey. Thank you.

1. Using the attached list of weekly newspapers that are members of the Iowa Newspaper Association, please list the paper you rank as the best in Iowa. List your answer by number.

2. Using the attached list of weekly newspapers that are members of the Iowa Newspaper Association, please list the paper you rank as the second best in Iowa. List your answer by number.

3. Using the attached list of weekly newspapers that are members of the Iowa Newspaper Association, please list the paper you rank as the third best in Iowa. List your answer by number.

4. Please turn to the next two pages and find a set of 30 statements called Statements of Quality. Select SEVEN statements from the list provided that you think MOST describe the newspaper you called the best weekly newspaper in Iowa. Put the number of that statement next to its ranking in order of importance, with one most important.

1. _____ 2. _____ 3. _____ 4. _____
5. _____ 6. _____ 7. _____

5. Read the statements again, looking for the overall strengths of weekly newspapers in Iowa. Please list the statements that best describe weekly newspapers in general in Iowa. Please list them here in order beginning with one, most descriptive.

1. _____ 2. _____ 3. _____ 4. _____
5. _____ 6. _____ 7. _____

6. Finally, look for the overall areas that most need improvement in weekly newspapers in general in Iowa. Please list them here by number.

7. If there are any strengths and weaknesses not addressed in the statements of quality, please discuss them here. Feel free to continue on another sheet of paper.

Statements of quality

These statements were developed from a variety of journalism resources, including comments about Iowa Newspaper Association contest entries, journal articles and comments from various industry publications.

1. Has a high ratio of staff-written copy to news releases or wire service copy
2. Encourages diversity of commentary on the editorial page
3. Allows wide access to readers for community news
4. Covers news from beyond the newspaper's immediate coverage area
5. Uses new technology to improve the product
6. Informs readers thoroughly and carefully about vital local issues
7. Balances negative news with positive news
8. Provides broad coverage of social injustices
9. Reports clearly, expertly and with authority
10. Emphasizes interpretation, background and context for news events
11. Invites reader participation with letters to the editor, action line, etc.
12. Encourages aggressive, courageous reporting when others want information suppressed
13. Places a premium on compassion and sensitivity to feelings of readers
14. Reflects differences in race, ethnic origin, religion, age and gender in its community
15. Hires a competent staff, often with specialized skills
16. Remains independent of influences by powerful people and organizations
17. Uses photographs and graphics effectively as communication tools
18. Provides public leadership for community projects
19. Allocates a significant amount of space to news vs. advertising content
20. Produces bright, colorful writing
21. Prints news honestly and accurately
22. Creates an informed electorate
23. Recognizes the accomplishments of citizens and community groups
24. Has a particular personality that identifies with the community
25. Presents news in a clean, well-organized fashion
26. Demonstrates no political biases in news coverage
27. Insists on prompt, timely coverage of events and trends
28. Uses color to enhance presentation of stories
29. Remains independent of advertising influences on the news
30. Tries to be complete by covering important local events

Iowa Newspaper Association Weeklies

The following list includes weekly newspapers that are members of the Iowa Newspaper Association. They are listed in alphabetical order by community.

1. Ackley, Ackley World Journal
2. Adair, Adair News
3. Adel, Dallas County News
4. Afton, Star Enterprise
5. Akron, Akron Register-Tribune
6. Albia, Monroe County News
7. Albia, Albia Union-Republican
8. Algona, Algona Upper Des Moines
9. Allison, Butler County Tribune-Journal
10. Alta, Alta Advertiser
11. Altoona, Altoona Herald-Mitchellville Index
12. Anamosa, Anamosa Journal-Eureka
13. Anita, Anita Tribune
14. Ankeny, Ankeny Today
15. Anthon, Anthon Herald
16. Armstrong, Armstrong Journal
17. Audubon, Audubon News-Advocate
18. Aurelia, Aurelia Sentinel
19. Avoca, Avoca Journal-Herald
20. Bancroft, Bancroft Register
21. Bayard, The News-Gazette
22. Bedford, Bedford Times-Press
23. Belle Plaine, The Belle Plaine Union
24. Bellevue, The Herald-Leader
25. Belmond, Belmond Independent
26. Bettendorf, Bettendorf News
27. Bettendorf, The South Benton Star-Press
28. Bloomfield, The Bloomfield Democrat
29. Breda, The Breda News
30. Britt, The Britt News-Tribune
31. Brooklyn, Brooklyn Chronicle
32. Brooklyn, The Free Press
33. Buffalo Center, Buffalo Center Tribune
34. Calmar, Calmar Courier
35. Carlisle, The Carlisle Citizen
36. Carroll, Carroll Today
37. Cascade, Cascade Pioneer-Advertiser
38. Central City, The Linn-News Letter
39. Chariton, Chariton Leader and Herald-Patriot
40. Charter Oak/Ute, The Newspaper
41. Clarinda, The Herald-Journal
42. Clarion, The Wright County Monitor
43. Clarksville, The Clarksville Star
44. Clear Lake, Clear Lake Reporter
45. Clearfield, The Clearfield Chronicle
46. Colfax, The Jasper County Tribune
47. Columbus Junction, The Columbus Gazette
48. Conrad, Conrad Record
49. Coon Rapids, Coon Rapids Enterprise

50. Corning, The Adams County Free Press
51. Correctionville, The Correctionville News
52. Corwith, The Corwith Herald
53. Corydon, The Times-Republican
54. Cresco, Times-Plain Dealer
55. Danbury, The Danbury Review
56. Davenport, The Catholic Messenger
57. Dayton, Dayton Review
58. Decorah, Decorah Journal and Public Opinion
59. Denison, Denison Bulletin
60. Denver, The Forum
61. Des Moines, Business Record
62. DeWitt, The Observer
63. Diagonal, The Diagonal Progress
64. Donnellson, The Donnellson Star
65. Doon, Doon Press
66. Dows, Dows Advocate
67. Dubuque, Dubuque Leader
68. Dunlap, The Dunlap Reporter
69. Dyersville, Dyersville Commercial
70. Dysart, The Dysart Reporter
71. Eagle Grove, Eagle Grove Eagle
72. Eddyville, Eddyville Tribune
73. Edgewood, Edgewood Reminder
74. Eldon, Eldon and Batavia Beacon Forum
75. Eldora, Hardin County Index
76. Eldora, Eldora Herald-Ledger
77. Eldridge, The North Scott Press
78. Elgin, The Elgin Echo
79. Elk Horn, Elk Horn-Kimballton Review
80. Elkader, The Clayton County Register
81. Emmetsburg, The Democrat
82. Emmetsburg, The Emmetsburg Reporter
83. Essex, The Essex Independent
84. Everly, Everly/Royal News
85. Exira, Audubon County Journal
86. Farmington, Van Buren County Leader-Record
87. Fayette, Fayette Leader
88. Fontanelle, Fontanelle Observer
89. Forest City, The Forest City Summit
90. Fredericksburg, The Review
91. Fremont, Fremont Gazette
92. Garner, The Garner Leader and Signal
93. George, Lyon County News
94. Gladbrook, Northern-Sun Print
95. Glenwood, The Opinion-Tribune
96. Glidden, The Glidden Graphic
97. Gowrie, The Gowrie News
98. Graettinger, The Graettinger Times
99. Grand Junction, Globe-Free Press and Rippey News
100. Greene, The Greene Recorder
101. Greenfield, The Adair County Free Press
102. Grinnell, The Grinnell Herald-Register
103. Griswold, Griswold American

104. Grundy Center, The Grundy Register
105. Guthrie Center, Guthrie Center Times
106. Guttenberg, The Guttenberg Press
107. Hamburg, Hamburg Reporter
108. Hampton, Hampton Chronicle-Times
109. Harlan, The Harlan News-Advertiser and Tribune
110. Hartley, The Hartley Sentinel
111. Hawarden, The Independent
112. Hawkeye, Hawkeye Booster
113. Hedrick, Hedrick Journal
114. Holstein, The Advance
115. Hopkinton, Delaware County and Hopkington Leader
116. Hospers, Siouxland Press
117. Hubbard, The South Hardin Signal-Review
118. Hudson, The Hudson Herald
119. Hull, Sioux County Index-Reporter
120. Humboldt, Humboldt Independent
121. Humeston, Humeston New Era
122. Ida Grove, Ida County Courier
123. Ida Grove, Ida County Pioneer Record
124. Independence, Bulletin-Journal
125. Indianola, The Record-Herald and Indianola Tribune
126. Inwood, The West Lyon Herald
127. Iowa Falls, Times-Citizen
128. Ireton, The Ireton Examiner
129. Jefferson, The Jefferson Herald
130. Jessup, Citizen Herald
131. Jewell, S. Hamilton Record-News
132. Kalona, The Kalona News
133. Kanawha, The Kanawha Reporter
134. Keosauqua, Van Buren Register County
135. Keota, The Keota Eagle
136. Kingsley, Kingsley News/Times
137. Knoxville, Journal-Express
138. La Porte City, The Progress-Review
139. Lake City, Lake City Graphic
140. Lake Mills, Lake Mills Graphic
141. Lake Park, Lake Park News
142. Lake View, Lake View Resort
143. Lamoni, The Lamoni Chronicle
144. Lamont, The Lamont Leader
145. Lansing, Allamakee Journal
146. Laurens, The Laurens Sun
147. Lenox, Lenox Time Table
148. Leon, The Leon Journal-Reporter
149. Lime Springs, Lime Springs Herald
150. Logan, Logan Herald Observer
151. Lone Tree, The Lone Tree Reporter
152. Lowden, Sun-News
153. Madrid, The Madrid Register-News
154. Malvern, The Malvern Leader
155. Manchester, The Manchester Press
156. Manilla, The Manilla Times
157. Manly, Manly Signal

158. Manning, The Manning Monitor
159. Manson, The Calhoun County Journal-Herald
160. Mapleton, The Mapleton Press
161. Maquoketa, Maquoketa Sentinel-Press
162. Marcus, The Marcus News
163. Marengo, The Pioneer-Republican
164. McGregor, The North Iowa Times
165. Mechanicsville, The Pioneer Herald
166. Mediapolis, Mediapolis News
167. Milford, Milford Mail
168. Missouri Valley, Missouri Valley Times-News
169. Monona, Monona Billboard
170. Monroe, The Monroe Mirror
171. Montezuma, The Montezuma Republican
172. Monticello, The Monticello Express
173. Moravia, Moravia Union
174. Morning Sun, Morning Sun News-Herald
175. Moulton, Moulton Tribune
176. Mount Ayr, Mount Ayr Record-News
177. Mount Vernon, The Sun
178. Merville, The Merville Record
179. Nashua, Nashua Reporter
180. Neola, Gazette
181. Nevada, Nevada Journal
182. New Hampton, The New Hampton Economist
183. New London, The New London Journal
184. New Sharon, New Sharon Star
185. Newell, The Buena Vista County Journal
186. Nora Springs, Nora Springs Advertiser/Rockford Register
187. North English, The North English Record
188. Northwood, The Northwood Anchor
189. Norwalk, North Warren Town and Country News
190. Oakland, Acorn Times
191. Ochevedan, Ochevedan Press-Melvin News
192. Odebolt, The Chronicle
193. Ogden, The Ogden Reporter
194. Onawa, Onawa Democrat
195. Orange City, The Sioux County Capital-Democrat
196. Osage, Mitchell County Press-News
197. Osceola, Sentinel-Tribune
198. Ossian, The Ossian Bee
199. Oxford, The Oxford Leader
200. Panora, The Guthrie County Vedette
201. Parkersburg, Eclipse-News-Review
202. Paullina, Paullina Times
203. Pella, The Pella Chronicle
204. Perry, The Perry Chief
205. Peterson, The Peterson Patriot
206. Pleasantville, Marion County News
207. Pocahontas, Pocahontas Record Democrat, Rolfe Arrow, Fonda Times
208. Postville, Postville Herald-Leader
209. Prairie City, Prairie City News
210. Preston, Preston Times
211. Primghar, The O'Brien County Bell

212. Rake, Rake Register
213. Red Oak, The Red Oak Express
214. Reinbeck, Reinbeck Courier
215. Remsen, Bell-Enterprise
216. Riceville, Riceville Recorder
217. Richland, The Plainsmen-Clarion
218. Ringsted, Ringsted Dispatch
219. Riverside, Riverside Current
220. Rock Rapids, Lyon Co. Reporter
221. Rock Valley, The Rock Valley Bee
222. Rockwell City, Calhoun County Advocate
223. Ruthven, Ruthven Zipcode
224. Sac City, The Sac Sun
225. Saint Ansgar, Saint Ansgar Enterprise
226. Sanborn, The Sanborn Pioneer
227. Schaller, Schaller Herald
228. Schleswig, The Schleswig Leader
229. Scranton, The Scranton Journal
230. Sergeant Bluff, Sergeant Bluff Advocate
231. Seymour, The Seymour Herald
232. Sheffield, The Sheffield Press
233. Sheldon, The Sheldon Mail-Sun
234. Sheldon, N'West Iowa Review
235. Shenandoah, Shenandoah Valley News
236. Sibley, The Osceola County Gazette-Tribune
237. Sidney, The Sidney Argus-Herald
238. Sigourney, The News-Review
239. Sioux Center, The Sioux Center News
240. Sioux City, The Globe
241. Sioux City, Northwest Iowa Business News
242. Sioux City, Sioux City Reporter
243. Sioux Rapids, Bulletin Press
244. Slater, The Tri-County Times
245. Solon, Solon Economist
246. Spirit Lake, Spirit Lake Beacon
247. Stacyville, Monitor-Review
248. State Center, Enterprise-Record
249. Storm Lake, Pilot-Tribune
250. Story City, The Story City Herald
251. Stratford, Stratford Courier
252. Strawberry Point, The Strawberry Point Press-Journal
253. Stuart, The Stuart Herald
254. Sully, Diamond Trail News
255. Sumner, Sumner Gazette
256. Sutherland, Sutherland Courier
257. Swea City, The Swea City Herald-Press
258. Tabor, The Fremont-Mills Beacon-Enterprise
259. Tama, The Tama News-Herald
260. Thompson, The Thompson Courier
261. Thornton, The Southern County News
262. Tipton, The Tipton Conservative and Advertiser
263. Titonka, The Titonka Topic
264. Toledo, Toledo Chronicle
265. Traer, The Traer Star-Clipper

266. Tripoli, The Tripoli Leader
267. Urbandale, Urbandale News
268. Vail, The Vail Observer
269. Villisca, Villisca Review
270. Walnut, The Walnut Bureau
271. Wapello, The Wapello Republican
272. Waukon, The Waukon Standard
273. Waverly, Bremer Co. Independent
274. Waverly, Waverly Democrat
275. Wellman, The Wellman Advance
276. West Bend, The West Bend Journal
277. West Branch, West Branch Times
278. West Burlington, Des Moines Co. News
279. West Des Moines, Western Express
280. West Liberty, The West Liberty Area Index
281. West Point, West Point Bee
282. West Union, The Fayette County Union
283. What Cheer, Patriot-Chronicle
284. Whittemore, The Whittemore Independent
285. Williamsburg, The Journal Tribune
286. Wilton, Wilton-Durant Advocate News
287. Winfield, Beacon/News
288. Winterset, Madisonian
289. Winthrop, The Winthrop News
290. Woodbine, The Woodbine Twiner
291. Woodward, NE Dallas County Record
292. Wyoming, Midland Times
293. Zeoring, Tri-County News

Questionnaire for newsroom staff

1. Your job title or description: _____

2. Your primary responsibilities (beat, area of coverage, editorial duties, etc.):

3. Your sex: Male _____ Female _____

4. Your age: _____

5. Your level of education: high school _____

college _____ years _____ degree _____

majored in _____

minored in _____

graduate school _____

degree _____

majored in _____

6. Total years in the journalism business: _____

7. Total years with your present newspaper employer: _____

8. Brief description of previous employment: _____

9. Your salary (optional but helpful to the study): _____

Please circle the answer that best describes your response. Please choose **ONLY ONE**:

10. I think my salary and benefits are:

a) more than adequate

b) adequate

c) less than adequate

11. I think I work:
- a) much too hard for my salary
 - b) harder than I'm expected to but without resentment
 - c) the right amount to earn my salary
 - d) less than I should to earn my salary
12. I took this job:
- a) as an excellent opportunity to use my skills
 - b) as an interim step toward a bigger opportunity
 - c) because nothing better was available
 - d) other
13. I plan to remain at this newspaper:
- a) indefinitely
 - b) several years or until I really need a change
 - c) one more year or so, until I gain experience for a more prestigious paper
 - d) only until something better comes along
 - e) I want to leave immediately
14. I could be lured away from this newspaper:
- a) by a bigger salary offer
 - b) by a better weekly
 - c) by a daily
 - d) by a change in career
 - e) nothing could lure me away
15. The writing at this newspaper is:
- a) as good as any newspaper, daily or weekly, in the state
 - b) better than other daily or weekly newspapers in the state
 - c) good enough for a weekly newspaper
 - d) limited because it is a weekly newspaper
 - e) worse than other weekly newspapers in the state
16. I think my experience here is:
- a) as strong as it would be at any other newspaper in the state, daily or weekly
 - b) better than at most weeklies
 - c) about what I expected from a weekly
 - d) restricted by inadequate resources
 - e) inferior to comparable weekly newspapers
17. The one thing I am motivated most by:
- a) getting the scoop on other media
 - b) pleasing my editors
 - c) giving the readers information they need
 - d) finding exclusive material for photos or stories
 - e) doing my personal best
18. The photography on this newspaper is:
- a) as good as it is at any daily or weekly newspaper in the state
 - b) better than at other weeklies in the state
 - c) as good as other weeklies in the state
 - d) limited because it is a weekly
 - e) worse than other weeklies in the state

- 19) The majority of my stories are:
- a) self-generated
 - b) assigned by my editor
 - c) a mix of enterprise and assignments by my editor
 - d) generated by sources
 - e) other
20. The initial direction I get from an editor about assignments is:
- a) more than adequate
 - b) adequate but I'd like more
 - c) adequate and I'm satisfied
 - d) less than adequate
 - e) nonexistent
21. The feedback I get from an editor when a job is done is:
- a) more than adequate
 - b) adequate but I'd like more
 - c) adequate and I'm satisfied
 - d) less than adequate
 - e) nonexistent
22. The design and appearance of this newspaper is:
- a) as good as at any daily or weekly newspaper in the state
 - b) better than other weeklies in the state
 - c) as good as other weeklies in the state
 - d) limited because it is a weekly
 - e) inferior to other weeklies in the state
23. The management at this newspaper is:
- a) openly positive about the work of the news-editorial staff
 - b) quietly supportive of the work of the news-editorial staff
 - c) indifferent to the work of the news-editorial staff
 - d) grudgingly tolerant of the work of the news-editorial staff
 - e) hostile about the work of the news-editorial staff
24. The management of this newspaper is:
- a) openly positive about my work
 - b) quietly supportive of my work
 - c) indifferent to my work
 - d) grudgingly tolerant of my work
 - e) hostile about my work.
25. Overall, I think this newspaper is:
- a) as good as any daily or weekly newspaper in the state
 - b) better than other weeklies in the state
 - c) as good as other weeklies in the state
 - d) limited because it is a weekly
 - e) inferior to other weeklies in the state

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